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“THEY GOING TO THROW YOU IN JACKSON WHERE YOU BELONG”:
DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL DISABILITY IN THE WORKS OF
WILLIAM FAULKNER AND FLANNERY O’CONNOR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Marie E. Lawson

December 2015

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Marie E. Lawson

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Marie E. Lawson

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2015

Dr. Susan Shillinglaw	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. John Engell	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. Noelle Brada-Williams	Department of English and Comparative Literature

ABSTRACT

“THEY GOING TO THROW YOU IN JACKSON WHERE YOU BELONG”: DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL DISABILITY IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM FAULKNER AND FLANNERY O’CONNOR

by Marie E. Lawson

Mentally disabled characters in the works of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor are often subjected to mistreatment, neglect, and violence at the hands of their families and communities. In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *The Hamlet* (1940) and Flannery O’Connor’s “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” (1955) and *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960), characters with mental disabilities are depicted in such a way as to evoke sympathy for the characters without the narratives overtly calling for sympathy. This is achieved through the juxtaposition of positive narrative portrayals with negative treatment by the characters’ families, and the violence these characters endure is the extreme but necessary final step in creating sympathy for them.

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Introduction

In *The Novels of William Faulkner* (1964), Olga Vickery examines a scene in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) where Benjy Compson, who is mentally disabled, accompanies the family servant Dilsey to Easter Sunday church services. The ruckus this incites in the community is twofold; both Benjy's mental disability and the blurred lines of racial segregation become a point of contention for the town. Vickery observes, "the whites regard [Benjy] as a problem: since he is obviously white, they frown on his attendance at a Negro church, but since he is obviously an idiot, they are unwilling to receive him into theirs. Somehow in the process, the additional fact that he is a human being is forgotten by all except Dilsey" (47). This scene, and Vickery's interpretation of it, exemplifies the issues characters with mental disabilities face in the works of both William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. These characters are alienated and neglected by their families and communities, and while such treatment dehumanizes them, it also proves to be a strong way for the narrative to secure sympathy for these mentally disabled characters.

William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor share an interest in the plight of the mentally challenged. This thesis examines the ways in which characters who are mentally disabled are depicted, and how sympathy for their marginalized and victimized status is achieved. Characters with other disabilities are not considered here, such as Faulkner's Darl (*As I Lay Dying*, 1930), who exhibits mental illness but is still able to interact with his family; or O'Connor's Hulga/Joy ("Good Country People," 1955), who is physically disabled. There is a distinction between characters with mental disability

and characters who exhibit other forms of disability, even mental illness, in that the characters who are mentally disabled are depicted as unable to speak and are thus unable to successfully interact with the families and communities that do not have the patience or interest to work to understand them.

Faulkner and O'Connor depict characters with mental disabilities who are neglected, mistreated, and abandoned by those around them. Faulkner's Benjy Compson (*The Sound and the Fury*, 1929) and Ike Snopes (*The Hamlet*, 1940), as well as O'Connor's Lucynell Crater ("The Life You Save May Be Your Own," 1955) and Bishop (*The Violent Bear it Away*, 1960) stand apart from other special needs characters in these authors' works because they are mentally disabled, and the degree of their disability leaves them unable to understand the mistreatment and manipulation they receive from their family and neighbors. These characters' inability to speak drastically limits their capacity to defend themselves or make their needs known.

While these characters are often critically dismissed as explorations of the grotesque (as is the case for O'Connor's characters) or as stylistic experimentation (as is often the case for Faulkner's characters), the narratives themselves actively encourage a closer look. Each of the four characters is presented not only as a sympathetic character (which is rare in O'Connor's works) but also as capable of growth, compassion, and profound emotion. The narratives display the positive attributes of these characters, and yet many of those around them view them as little more than empty, mindless, usable shells. The marked difference between how the narrative portrays the characters and how their kin/community perceives them establishes sympathy in the reader, as does the

dichotomy of portrayal and perception, combined with narratives of lifelong neglect and acts of extreme violence. Thus the narratives create sympathy for these mentally disabled characters by establishing the ignorance of many of those around them, and then through unwarranted abuse, the narratives call for greater understanding and defense of those with special needs.

O'Connor critics have often viewed disability in O'Connor's works as largely connected to a spiritual message. In "The Parabolic in Faulkner, O'Connor, and Percy" (1983), Sallie McFague argues that the depiction of disability is essential to O'Connor because "mechanized, rationalistic society makes it extremely difficult to see beneath the surface of things to the essentials, to reality. Thus, distortion, caricature, the grotesque – her 'freaks' – are necessary to create the possibility of true vision" (55). O'Connor's purported authorial goals are most often recognized as spiritual rather than humanistic, so her characters, including those with disabilities, serve a spiritual purpose. Thelma J. Shinn, in "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace" (1968), notes an "inverted grotesqueness" in O'Connor's works, where the presence of physical disability accompanies spiritual health: "In most of these characters, their physical afflictions serve to protect them from a spiritual affliction" (61). This is not always the case, however; for example, in *The Violent Bear it Away*, Rayber's deafness can be viewed as a spiritual punishment in that the injury causing his hearing loss issued from Mason's gun, and the hearing aide he uses gives him a robotic, non-human quality. There seems to be no exception to Shinn's statement that "The idiots are protected from the corrupting influences of the modern world simply because they cannot reach them; they remain in

the innocent realm of childhood” (61). For better or worse, Lucynell and Bishop are largely portrayed as childlike and innocent.

Both Lucynell and Bishop are linked to O’Connor’s religious themes. When Lucynell falls asleep at the diner where Shiftlet abandons her, the waiter comments that she looks like an “angel of Gawd” (154), which directly links her to spiritual themes. Bishop is often explored in terms of his significance to Tarwater’s prophetic journey; Mason, Tarwater’s great uncle, has enjoined Tarwater to baptize Bishop, and because Tarwater feels this calling is beneath him, the resentment and defiance Tarwater experiences shape his actions throughout the novel. In *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor* (2005), Christina Bieber Lake explores how Bishop’s disability makes him the perfect Christ-like figure for conveying O’Connor’s beliefs in Catholicism. Lake contends that O’Connor “gives a complex and living incarnation of the beautiful: the retarded child Bishop” (142). Bishop’s spiritual significance is twofold; first, Lake notes, “Although criticism has tended to minimize Bishop’s importance in the novel by treating Tarwater’s call as merely the vestiges of the old man’s vision, O’Connor’s prose illustrates the clear centrality of [Bishop] as one that represents the divine mystery with which Tarwater will have to come to terms before he can begin his ministry” (147). Additionally, Rayber encourages Tarwater to look at Bishop and he initially refuses; Lake argues that “part of what Tarwater must recognize is that his calling is of the highest because it is of the lowest. This struggle to see Bishop correctly explains why Bishop operates as a kind of Christ figure. He is the lowliest of the low, and it is shocking that God would value him, as shocking as the fact that God would incarnate himself as a

human baby” (158). Thus, Bishop’s disability serves a thematic role in the novel’s plot, and most critics are satisfied to leave him in a role that is so blatantly the beginning and end of the author’s intention. O’Connor’s intense religious beliefs continue to dominate literary critical attention, while the products of her artistic imagination (like Lucynell and Bishop) are reduced to markers pinpointing O’Connor’s particular spiritual ideals.

Faulkner’s characters with mental disabilities have also undergone their fair share of critical examination, but while Ike’s and Benjy’s mental disability have been noted, the subject has by no means been exhausted. Ike’s relationship with the cow is the main focus of almost all critical mention of him and his mental disability blurs the lines between bestiality and innocent romance. Lance Langdon, in “Commodifying Freedom: Horses in *The Hamlet*” (2012), reads the scene of bestiality as a reflection of “farmer’s autochthony,” where “Ike weds himself to the land through the cow, and the men in watching him do so enact in fantasy that same wedding that governs their working lives” (40). The men therefore are drawn to Ike’s romance because they too are romanced not by the cow herself, but by a more primal connection to the land, to work the land and see it produce. While this lends a somewhat positive reading to the men’s voyeurism, it does not account for the fact that the publicity of Ike’s relationship with his cow is the very thing that gets her butchered. In fact, rather than connecting Ike to the men through a primal allure to the land, the peep show drastically separates Ike from the rest of the community as their voyeurism places him in a grotesque barnyard show that he does not realize he is participating in. He is an *other*, so interesting to the men because they cannot relate to him. The very marked difference in narrative tone between Ike’s

experience in the hamlet and outside of it both supports and encourages this reading, and while some readers conceive this section as a satire on romance or as a grotesque comedy, the narrative simply does not support such a view.

Benjy's mental disability also attracts ample critical attention, but the result is often an exploration of how his simplistic mind conveys chronology and a powerful sense of loss, to name the two largest scholastic interests. These are important themes because, while they often focus on the symbology of time and loss, they also explore what each issue means to Benjy specifically, and thus bolster his importance as a character. Marjorie Pryse goes to extensive lengths to actually graph out Benjy's temporal journey in "Textual Duration Against Chronological Time: Graphing Memory in Faulkner's Benjy Section" (2009). Responding to a long-standing critical fascination with how Benjy's consciousness flows, jerks, or otherwise moves through memories, Pryse views Benjy's narrative as "what consciousness would look like if we could separate memories from past experience" (17). Pryse summarizes a commonly-held critical assumption that, "Since for Benjy, the present serves only as stimulus out of and again back into particular moments from the past, Faulkner encourages the reader to look directly at what loss would feel like if it were immediately accessible to us" (21). Thus Benjy's mental disability allows the narrative to explore this theme without overcomplicating it with complex emotions or language. Benjy's severe mental disability, then, gives him considerable narrative value.

While the way Benjy presents his narrative is shaped by his disability, much of the tragedy he recounts in his narrative results from others treating him in a subhuman way because of his disability. While Benjy's mental disability is important to how he recounts his experiences, the ways in which his disability affects his experiences are often overlooked. Maria Truchan-Tataryn marks one exception to this trend as she investigates disability within literature in "Textual Abuse: Faulkner's Benjy" (2005). Truchan-Tataryn notes that "There is overwhelming consensus ... acknowledging Faulkner's success in portraying the consciousness of an 'idiot' in the character of Benjy Compson" (159). She argues that "unquestioning acceptance of [Benjy] as a successful representation of intellectual disability reveals an underlying ableism in the literary critical endeavor and an academic acquiescence to dated socio-cultural constructions of disability" (160). Thus, if Faulkner critics agree that he has captured the interiority of a mentally disabled person in the blank, infantile, and sub-human Benjy Compson, such a reception damages (or perpetuates damage already done to) the real social plight of people with mental disability. Truchan-Tataryn summarizes:

While Faulkner's exploration of idiocy can be understood, if not condoned, by his historical context, his work has authorized a legacy of writing that sustains, with few exceptions, the idiot myth. For critics, Faulkner's rendering of human blankness has typified individuals medically labeled as idiots. Benjy, however, more accurately illuminates not the (lack of) subjectivity of a cognitively impaired individual in lived experience but rather imaginings projected upon a population denied agency and voice by authors of public policy as well as narrative texts. (163)

Truchan-Tataryn's most universally applicable statement is that "Inhuman treatment is justified by subhuman status and evidence of cognition is subsumed by a self-authorized

judgment of mindlessness” (167). Each character examined here lives in a community that has deemed them mindless and therefore subhuman and acts neglectfully or abusively as a result.

Disability Studies within literature, of course, is a much larger body of work than what is evident in the critiques of Faulkner and O’Connor. In “From Virginia’s Sister to Friday’s Silence: Presence, Metaphor, and the Persistence of Disability in Contemporary Writing,” (2012), Stuart Murray assesses the literary trend that places “characters with disabilities at the margin of a text,” where they “only exist to make the plot turn in a certain direction or to underscore an ableist narrative in which a non-disabled character comes to know himself better through an interaction with disability” (249). While both Faulkner’s and O’Connor’s narratives directly engage with this pattern, they also undercut it. For O’Connor’s disabled characters, the narratives surrounding them all but promise to comply with Murray’s observations, where they at first seem to situate the nondisabled characters so that they will learn some life lesson from the disabled characters they encounter. For example, in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Tom Shiftlet needs to use Lucynell in order to get to the real prize (the car). Perhaps in any other author’s hands he may have learned something about sympathy and become a better person for his close contact with the mentally disabled Lucynell, but in this story he makes no such changes and much of the unfinished atmosphere at the end of the story results from the unsatisfied anticipation of such an outcome.

Murray also notes a “long tradition of disability novels in which a genocidal impulse toward those with disabilities is all too clear” (248). The indication here is that

disability interferes with a neatly ordered world, and thus cannot be present in a neatly ordered ending. If harmony is to be restored at the end of a story, disability must be erased. O'Connor engages with the tradition of killing off characters with disabilities by the end of the narrative, and again dismantles such readings. While Lucynell is still alive at the end of her story, she is abandoned and alone fifty miles from home with no imaginable way to get back. When the story continues on without her, leaving her behind as Shiftlet drives away and literally leaves her behind, she is basically dead to the plotline.

That is not to say that O'Connor is using her works to argue for greater rights for the disabled. In fact, her own comments on her works ascribe to her characters, especially to Bishop, the role of a *spiritual* guide, where the other characters' refusal to change after contact with them speaks to their own religious struggles. Lake quotes O'Connor as saying Bishop is to be "a kind of Christ image, though a better way to think of it is probably just as a kind of redemptive figure" (167). Indeed, O'Connor does not profess to extend an agenda of disability rights, but there is the unmistakable tendency for these narratives to paint mentally disabled characters, specifically, as innocent, uncorrupted and trusting, which contrasts starkly with a world of able-bodied and physically disabled characters within her works who are scheming, selfish and naive. Lucynell and Bishop are subject to the same violence and neglect as the rest of the inhabitants in O'Connor's fiction, but they are unique in that the narrative itself suggests they do not merit such mistreatment.

Faulkner engages with stereotypical plotlines of disability by confounding their central tenet – that if a disabled character is of secondary importance to a nondisabled character, existing only to enhance the narrative of the nondisabled character, then by virtue of their secondary status they are less complex, less interesting, essentially less worthy of consideration. Faulkner directly refutes this not only by portraying disabled characters who arguably exist largely outside the considerations of their nondisabled counterparts (each member of the Compson family is so absorbed by their own drama by 1928 that Benjy must spend his days with Dilsey’s family and not his own, while Ike barely appears in the narratives of his kin), but also by allotting both Ike and Benjy considerable, dedicated narrative attention. Each character is allowed to be just that – a character – rather than a supporting role on the outskirts of the narrative, and thus Faulkner gives dignity to his disabled characters.

Faulkner, like O’Connor, complicates interpretations of his works by commenting on them. His remarks about Benjy in particular become problematic, especially when he states, “The only emotion I can have for Benjy is grief and pity for all mankind. You can’t feel anything for Benjy because he doesn’t feel anything” (qtd in Roggenbuck, 584). This assertion of emotional emptiness is just one aspect of Benjy’s character that the narrative expressly refutes, as this thesis will explore. Thus the *narratives’* presentations of these characters are my main concern here. Faulkner’s notoriously unreliable comments on his works, coupled with Robert McGill’s observations in “The Life You Write May Be Your Own: Epistolary Autobiography and the Reluctant Resurrection of Flannery O’Connor” (2004) that “in letters and essays [O’Connor]

frequently follows New Critical thinking by asserting that her life and intentions should be extrinsic to readings of her texts, and in her early career she was reticent to provide interpretations of her stories” (33), allows for a close examination of these author’s works without relying on their own professed (and problematic) authorial intentions. Essentially, this thesis strives to reclaim Lucynell, Bishop, Benjy, and Ike, and to examine their individual identities in the face of their social, critical, and even authorial strictures.

Chapter 1

O'Connor's Unjustly Victimized Victims

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own"

Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" follows the arrival of a one-armed conman, Tom T. Shiftlet, on a farm owned by the aging Mrs. Crater and her deaf and mentally disabled daughter, Lucynell. The unscrupulous Shiftlet works on the farm and gains the mother's trust with the aim of obtaining possession of the family's car. Mrs. Crater is blinded by her desire to have help around the farm, so she offers her daughter's hand in marriage to tie Shiftlet to the family. Shiftlet complies and marries Lucynell, but once he has the car, Shiftlet abandons Lucynell on their honeymoon trip at a roadside diner one hundred miles from the farm.

These two disabled characters are not depicted in revolutionary ways: the narrative implies that Lucynell's mental disability protects her from engaging in the evils of the world around her, thus securing her innocence. She does, however, fall victim to such evils because she cannot care for herself, and no one else is caring for her. Shiftlet's disabled body, thanks to popular literary tropes, immediately suggests that he is damaged morally or spiritually. What is remarkable in O'Connor's works is the way in which the narrative secures sympathy for Lucynell. This sympathy is generated not by her pitiable and mindless condition, as those around her perceive, but rather because she is manipulated by the very people who are supposed to care for her wellbeing. Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet devalue Lucynell, but this actually enforces her worth within the narrative.

She is objectified and ignored by her mother and Shiftlet, but her character continually asserts both her presence and humanity.

Although Lucynell is disabled, she does not adhere to literary traditions of disability. While the short story seems to duplicate the pattern Murray describes, where “yet another character with disabilities [is] at the margin of a text, [and] only exists to make the plot turn in a certain direction and to underscore an ableist narrative in which a non-disabled character comes to know himself better through an interaction with disability” (249), in fact Lucynell is at the center of the narrative. The short story further confounds this trope because it initially seems to be headed toward Shiftlet’s salvation through his relationship with Lucynell, but this does not happen. Lucynell does not change Shiftlet’s perspective, and her disability does not necessarily facilitate her abandonment at the diner; a character without mental disabilities could have been just as easily abandoned if he/she had fallen asleep. Lucynell is, however, the victim in this narrative, a condition which adheres to generic depictions of disability while simultaneously providing a foundation for reader’s sympathy.

Lucynell is depicted in varying ways. She is helpless, observant, developing; significantly, she is not a flat or static figure. At the beginning of the story, “the daughter was leaning very far down, hanging her head almost between her knees watching [Mr. Shiftlet] through a triangular door she had made in her overturned hair; and she suddenly fell in a heap on the floor and began to whimper. Mr. Shiftlet straightened her out and helped her get back in her chair” (149). The narrator, in a depiction of her posture, includes the helplessness of her limbs, describing Lucynell with “her head thrust forward

and her fat helpless hands hanging at the wrists” (146). The specificity of the description evokes conflicting interpretations; on the one hand, Lucynell’s *hands* are helpless, but not Lucynell herself. Her body might be limited in some ways, but by pointing to her hands only as being helpless, the words suggest Lucynell herself is not. The other side of this image, however, is that Lucynell is in fact so helpless that even her limbs can be described in such terms.

In these moments, Lucynell is a sympathetic figure, a young woman who can barely care for herself. While it is tempting to view these scenes as demeaning – Lucynell is not, after all, a powerful and independent figure – they in fact humanize her. Such characterizations may be extreme but they indeed mirror real life possibilities. The narrator does not use empowering or euphemistic language when describing Lucynell; the narrator simply recounts what Lucynell does, from falling off her chair to learning to say “bird.” This separation between narrator and character represents the arms-length at which most of society holds Lucynell and others like her. There may not be implicit judgment but neither is there an attempt at understanding.

The narrative’s most blatant critique of this social detachment comes into play at Shiftlet’s introduction: “His left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him” (145). Shiftlet comes onto the farm, armless, leaning to one side, but fully lucid. Lucynell, on the other hand, “a large girl in a short blue organdy dress, saw him all at once and jumped up and began to stamp and point and make excited speechless sounds. Mr. Shiftlet stopped just inside the yard and set his box on the ground and tipped his hat

at her as if she were not in the least afflicted” (145). Shiftlet has a host of physical disabilities – Lucynell’s mother labels him as a “poor disabled friendless drifting man” (152) – and yet the narrator names only Lucynell as “afflicted.” This blunt and demeaning moment in the narrative foreshadows the brutal treatment Lucynell receives from Shiftlet when he abandons her.

This moment also juxtaposes Shiftlet’s greeting, which avoids Lucynell’s disability, with the immediate narrative commentary that points out her disability, emphasizing society’s devaluation of those who are mentally disabled. Alison Arant, in “‘A Moral Intelligence’: Mental Disability and Eugenic Resistance in Welty’s ‘Lily Daw and the Three Ladies’ and O’Connor’s ‘The Life You Save May Be Your Own’” (2012), evaluates the short story by examining its relationship to contemporary eugenic rhetoric, claiming “the context of the marriage of a woman with mental disabilities [to a man without mental disabilities] ... generated anxiety in a national eugenic discourse” (80). The fear was that mental disability was genetic and inheritable, and that if people with mental disabilities married (and subsequently had children) mental disability would become more widespread. Arant notes that, in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “the concept of the mentally disabled woman as threat and victim is at play,” but Lucynell does not pose a threat to communal morality because “Lucynell’s disability precludes the existence of any community whatsoever” (80). Lucynell’s disability, particularly in her muteness, does indeed interfere with her ability to join the larger community around her, and she is not so much involved in her immediate community (i.e. her mother and Mr. Shiftlet) as she is used by it. Her victimization, however, is

much more profound than her threatening reproductive possibilities because when she is abandoned at the diner at the end of the story, there is no sense of relief, no sense that a societal danger has been avoided. Rather the scene produces both shock and sympathy for the newly made victim.

Shiftlet's introduction provides a focused moment of narrative critique on eugenic ideology, where Arant notes "Shiftlet rejects definitions of fitness that assume a link between physical and moral traits, a standard that both he and [Lucynell] fail to meet" (82). Arant observes that "O'Connor connects the Craters' lack of a man in the household to immobility and deterioration, and Shiftlet presents the solution to both problems" (80); his "willingness to overlook Lucynell's disabilities and his keen interest in the car initially situate him as the solution to the Craters' problems" (80). Shiftlet's avoidance of Lucynell's disability is problematic, however. After all, would Shiftlet's greeting change if he did acknowledge her disability? Should Shiftlet tip his hat differently, or not at all, since Lucynell is disabled? The term "afflicted" implies limits, both to Lucynell's abilities and to her importance to the story since, from its very introduction, Shiftlet appears to ignore her disabilities. Shiftlet's manners contrast with Lucynell's frantic actions, but this twists in on itself when Shiftlet's manners are abandoned as he savagely abandons Lucynell, and the marginalized woman comes to dominate the reader's attention. Lucynell's behavior reveals her limited cognition but Shiftlet's behavior reveals disturbing and dangerous emotional limitations. Shiftlet's socially valued manners are but a smokescreen, while Lucynell is unaware of social decorum and thus lacks any manipulation.

While Lucynell's jumping and stamping paints a vivid picture of a woman with cognitive disabilities, Gary M. Ciuba explores the narrative through the framework of Lucynell's deafness. Lucynell's disability seems to shape the way her mother and Shiftlet treat her more than her deafness does, however, because it curtails her understanding of the transactions going on around (and about) her; Lucynell's deafness is, nonetheless, a crucial aspect of her disability. In "'To the Hard of Hearing You Shout': Flannery O'Connor and the Imagination of Deafness" (2012), Ciuba argues that "Lucynell is primarily shown. Whereas Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater ignore and exclude the deaf woman as if she were invisible, the narrator records how Lucynell is insistently there. Indeed, Lucynell makes a show of herself. She moves around, gestures, and cries out, as if announcing and reasserting her deaf presence" (6). I would argue that her presence in general, deaf and mentally disabled and all the other facets that make up Lucynell Crater, is constantly bombarding the narrative so that the reader cannot forget about her as her mother and Shiftlet do. It is this insistence to be heard and marked, and the narrative compliance with such a desire, that prove Mrs. Crater's and Shiftlet's treatment of her as static and marginal to be both erroneous and damaging. Ciuba observes, "Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater miss the significance of Lucynell because they converse about her, but they do not converse with her. As the pair slyly conduct their marriage negotiations, Lucynell's vocalizations and gesticulations are just so much noise that must be ignored to complete their transaction" (8). Lucynell is making noise – the narrative is listening, but Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet are not.

The blunt and matter-of-fact nature with which the narrator describes Lucynell's actions makes her vividly real and particularly vulnerable. Lucynell's mannerisms are often crude, like when she stamps and wags her finger as Shiftlet lights a cigarette (147), and she also exhibits detachment when she looks through her mother at their parting and carelessly picks the faux cherries off her hat while driving with Shiftlet (154-5). This contrasts with the times when her attentions reveal an observant, though hidden, interiority. From their first meeting, Lucynell is immediately absorbed with Shiftlet: "the daughter sat down too and watched him with a cautious sly look as if he were a bird that had come up very close. He ... brought out a package of chewing gum and offered her a piece. She took it and unpeeled it and began to chew without taking her eyes off him" (146). Lucynell's attentiveness does not waver as Shiftlet's stay lengthens. As her mother proposes marriage between Lucynell and Shiftlet, Lucynell is "sitting on the floor a foot away, watching him, her eyes blue even in the dark" (151). Lucynell's active interiority is made apparent in the brief description of her while they are driving home from the wedding ceremony: "Every now and then her placid expression was changed by a sly isolated little thought like a shoot of green in the desert" (153). Neither these thoughts nor their nature is expounded upon, but this description shows her inner self to be awake and active. This description is crucial because it grants Lucynell an agency and an interiority that distinguishes her moments of helplessness.

Lucynell is not an object, as her mother and Shiftlet consider her to be, but rather a character in her own right. One of the most important facets of Lucynell's character is her seeming mental growth, however slight that might be. When she learns to say "bird,"

the first word she has spoken in her life, she is proving herself to be anything but static. Her fascination with Mr. Shiftlet and his reciprocated attention benefits Lucynell: Mr. Shiftlet “taught Lucynell, who was completely deaf and had never said a word in her life, to say the word ‘bird.’ The big rosy-faced girl followed him everywhere, saying ‘Burrrtdt ddbirrrtdt,’ and clapping her hands” (150). This moment of learning is crucial because not only is Lucynell capable of development, but she has never learned to speak living with her mother. Either her mother thought her incapable of speech and never sought to teach her, or Lucynell is somehow blossoming under the greater attention of a larger community that Shiftlet represents. Her ability to learn and say a word for the first time shows that Lucynell is capable of growth. This movement pushes against other instances of helplessness to create a woman who is much more dynamic than either her mother or Shiftlet give her allowance for.

These observations find their proof in the narrative voice. The objective narrator presents Lucynell as she is, neither coloring her as a victim to be pitied nor a champion who cannot be overcome. Lucynell is victimized by her mother and Shiftlet rather than by the narrative itself. Lucynell is vulnerable, but she is also sharp – her ability to learn a word at thirty years old and completely deaf demonstrates the possibility for mental growth. This objective narrative voice stands in sharp contrast to the voices of her mother and Shiftlet. When Lucynell’s mother describes her as innocent, she is imposing a static image onto Lucynell so that Shiftlet will find her appealing: “‘You want you an innocent woman, don’t you?’ she asked sympathetically. ‘You don’t want none of this trash.’ ‘No’m, I don’t,’ Mr. Shiftlet said. ‘One that can’t talk,’ she continued, ‘can’t

sass you back or use foul language. That's the kind for you to have. Right there' and she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands" (151). Whether it be her deafness or her mental disability (or both) that separate her from language, Lucynell exists outside of this transaction. Arant observes that "It is the mother's attempt to neutralize Lucynell's status as a social liability that effects the daughter's transition from threat to victim" (81). Lucynell's disabilities position her as a threat in eugenic discourse, so Mrs. Crater transforms Lucynell's specific conditions from eugenic hazards to marital fortune. Mrs. Crater speaks of her daughter's muteness as a blessing to a husband, overlooking the fact that it also limits Lucynell from expressing herself effectively to her husband.

Mrs. Crater further limits her daughter when she praises Lucynell's "smarts" by enumerating her skills on the farm – hardly the stuff of parental love: "[Lucynell is] the sweetest girl in the world. I would give her up for nothing on earth. She's smart too. She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe. I wouldn't give her up for a casket of jewels" (149). These menial chores do not describe intelligence, but they do objectify and demean Lucynell. Mrs. Crater describes her daughter as sweet, but then proceeds to describe all the chores a farm hand performs. Mrs. Crater places more value on Lucynell's usefulness than her personality.

Mrs. Crater's final shortchanging of her daughter proves to be Lucynell's downfall. Lucynell's mother is hungry for a son-in-law at the expense of her daughter, and this selfishness paves the way for Lucynell to be abandoned at a diner, miles from home. Arant notes, "The fulfillment of the mother's wish for a son-in-law is improbable

because of her daughter's inabilities to reason, speak, see clearly, or even balance herself ... [which] frame the daughter as a liability" (81). Lucynell's mother is relentless in forcing the idea of marriage onto Shiftlet. She approaches the subject often – after Lucynell learns to say "bird," Mrs. Crater pushes the subject with Shiftlet: "'Teach her to say something else,' the old woman said. 'What you want her to say next?' Mr. Shiftlet asked. The old woman's smile was broad and toothless and suggestive. 'Teach her to say 'sugarpie',' she said" (150). Ciuba views this as "Mrs. Crater [hoping] to recondition Lucynell further through speech" (7). Her repeated, and finally successful, attempts at getting Mr. Shiftlet to marry her daughter show that Mrs. Crater is blind to Lucynell's wellbeing. At best, she may be thinking of her daughter's security once she is gone, or she may be concerned with having more people around for Lucynell to interact with socially. Or she may be desirous of her own comfort and security as old age approaches – but none of this masks the fact that she is uniting her daughter with a stranger and opening a world of sexual and patriarchal rules and expectations that are not only new and foreign to Lucynell, but are potentially damaging as well. Ciuba suggests that Lucynell is "cheerfully carnal," "delighted to have a sweetheart" and has "an erotic energy that keeps her from being purely ethereal" (8), but this does not mean that she is ready for the experiences that come with matrimony.

Lucynell's silence is inseparable from the moment of her abandonment, when both Shiftlet and the narrative leave her at the diner and do not look back. Lucynell is asleep when she is abandoned a hundred miles from home, and it takes no stretch of the

imagination to presume that when she wakes, she will have little or no way to communicate to those around her where she is from or how to get her home:

He had driven about a hundred miles when ... he stopped in front of an aluminum-painted eating place called The Hot Spot and took her in and ordered her a plate of ham and grits. The ride had made her sleepy and as soon as she got up on the stool, she rested her head on the counter and shut her eyes. Before he could dish up the food, she was snoring gently. "Give it to her when she wakes up," Mr. Shiftlet said. "I'll pay for it now." The boy bent over her and stared at the long pink-gold hair and the half-shut sleeping eyes. Then he looked up and started at Mr. Shiftlet. "She looks like an angel of Gawd," he murmured. "Hitchhiker," Mr. Shiftlet explained. "I can't wait. I got to make Tuscaloosa." The boy bent over again and very carefully touched his finger to a strand of the golden hair and Mr. Shiftlet left. (154-155)

The chilling possibility here is that she never finds her way home and is institutionalized – she is presumed a hitchhiker and cannot say her own name – all for the sake of a car. Lucynell is also silenced in that her person, her future, and her safety mean nothing to Shiftlet. Although *his* only concern is taking the car and the money he was given, Shiftlet's abandonment of Lucynell has the potential to be life-shattering for her. She is a silent figure to him, a wisp of a presence that does not elicit a thought from him once he has left her. When Shiftlet leaves the diner, Lucynell is erased from the narrative as completely as if she had never been there – Shiftlet moves on to his own thoughts and troubles and Lucynell's involvement in the story is effectively over. While Ciuba suggests that "Although the deaf Lucynell gets left behind, she lingers as an unspoken presence" (9) for the reader, she is gone from Shiftlet's thoughts. Indeed, Shiftlet's spirits drop, he picks up a hitchhiker for the conversation and the company, and reminisces about his mother (who, in a psychological reading I will not attempt here, is

probably the foundation for Shiftlet's actions, therefore making the mother the unspoken presence, not the briefly known and recently abandoned wife).

While Lucynell is excluded from her mother's and Shiftlet's world since she can neither hear the plans her mother and Shiftlet make for her nor understand them, the narrative refuses to discount Lucynell as her family does. It is vital to separate the way the narrative attentively represents Lucynell from the way her mother and Shiftlet objectify her, because it is this dichotomy itself that shows Lucynell deserves better than she gets. The narrative does not overtly create sympathy for Lucynell, but rather depicts disgusting qualities in Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet that Lucynell cannot participate in. At the same time, Lucynell is depicted as innocent by the same narrative that records Mrs. Crater's toothless, suggestive smile (150) and a depressed Shiftlet's claim that Lucynell is just a hitchhiker (155). Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet continually act through selfishness and deceit, and the narrative is clear as to the outcome: Mrs. Crater is robbed of the car, the son-in-law she is desperate for, and the helpful daughter she had, while Shiftlet's spirits sink even after he gains the car with no strings attached. These characters are punished for objectifying Lucynell, while Lucynell's fate is not punishment but rather the destruction that comes when those who cannot defend themselves are left without defenders. Lucynell's behaviors may be crude and infantile, but she lacks all the deception and self-interest that her mother and Shiftlet continually display. It is impossible to be sympathetic to Mrs. Crater's or Shiftlet's plight, while Lucynell garners sympathy from the reader that the narrative utilizes when she is abandoned. The story

may continue to follow Shiftlet, but the reader's thoughts are left back at the diner, on the counter with the sleeping Lucynell.

The Violent Bear it Away

Lucynell is used and discarded by Shiftlet and her fate remains an ominous unknown at the end of her story. Bishop is also used and discarded, but his fate is no mystery. O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960) takes to the extreme the violence and abandonment special needs characters face in these works. In this novel, young Tarwater seeks out his rational-minded uncle Rayber after his guardian, the religious zealot Mason Tarwater, dies over breakfast. Tarwater struggles not only to reject Mason's demand that he be a prophet, but also to reject the anti-religious, scientific rationale that Rayber seeks to instill in him. Rayber's mentally disabled son Bishop is the tragic center of this struggle, since Mason assures young Tarwater that baptizing Bishop is his first prophetic task. Tarwater drowns Bishop in an attempt to eliminate the child as a prophetic temptation, yet he speaks the baptismal rite as he drowns Bishop. Tarwater continues to flee his calling until he is violated by a stranger, after which he finally accepts his calling and heads to the city to begin his life as a prophet.

Tarwater is undoubtedly the central character in the novel, and Bishop is often treated critically as being important mainly in Tarwater's story, as a vessel through which Tarwater struggles against his destiny. Bishop's death is often used as proof that Rayber, the aspiritual and scientifically minded man, is so fundamentally flawed that he feels no pain in the grips of his son's murder. While these conclusions offer sharp insights into both Tarwater's and Rayber's particular struggles, they position Bishop as more of a plot

point than a character. Tarwater and Rayber take center stage, while the tragedies of Bishop's short life and his resilience to them are dismissed, as is the role his disability plays within the novel.

Bishop and Lucynell share many of the same struggles. Like Lucynell, Bishop is unable to speak, and once again this proves to be a strong social limitation. Bishop is incapable of verbally conveying his thoughts to those around him, which creates an impasse neither Rayber nor Tarwater attempt to bridge. Bishop's limitations, however, are not so much that he cannot speak, but that he is not being heard. Bishop may not use words to communicate with his father or cousin, but he has a powerful way of conveying his most basic desires – he bellows, a primal form of communication. Bishop bellows when he is pulled from the fountain, when the dancers stop dancing, when Tarwater is drowning him. There is no mistaking this vocal communication – Bishop is unhappy and is, in a way, expressing his desire to *live*. He wants to continue the enjoyment of the fountain, the pleasure of watching the dancers, and the right to be alive. These cues are often ignored by a disciplinary father, an outraged group of dancers, and a selfish cousin, but these bellows are communication nonetheless. Bishop's tragedies are not so much the result of his inability to speak as they are of the inability of those around him to *hear* him when he does express himself. Bishop, like Lucynell, is vocalizing, but once again no one is listening.

Another similarity between Bishop and Lucynell is that Bishop is continually and pervasively *present* in the novel, making his presence known even when Tarwater doesn't want him around. Bishop is a "small pink-faced boy" with "white hair and a

knobby forehead” whose mouth is perpetually “hung in a silly smile” (31). Tarwater’s first description of his cousin is heavy with reaction; he sees Bishop’s eyes as “grey like the old man’s but clear, as if the other side of them went down and down into two pools of light” (23). The shock of seeing Bishop in person produces an honest assessment of Bishop’s eyes and the light he sees in them; only after Tarwater has had time to recover himself and refocus, he contorts his memory so that Bishop’s eyes are “clear and empty” (31). Tarwater wants to strip Bishop of importance but it is only when he can manipulate his own thoughts that he is able to do so.

In much the same way, Tarwater layers Bishop with intentions the boy cannot have. Tarwater feels “If he turned his head the opposite way, there would be the dim-witted boy, hanging onto the schoolteacher’s coat, watching him. His mouth hung in a lopsided smile but there was a judging sternness about his forehead” (160). There is no judgment in Bishop’s absorption with Tarwater, neither in his eyes nor his forehead, but Tarwater sees the expression of his guilty conscience over his treatment of his uncle Mason’s body in Bishop, his uncle’s look-alike. Tarwater is unable to bury Mason’s body, and this decision haunts him even if he refuses to admit it. Tarwater treats Bishop like a blank slate, ready to be inscribed with whatever Tarwater needs to exorcise, but Bishop’s personality is anything but blank and this creates a tension that lends force to the tragic nature of Tarwater’s actions. As will be discussed, Tarwater kills Bishop not for anything that Bishop has done, but rather to serve his own warped and futile attempts to escape the destiny his uncle has laid out for him.

Bishop is a playful, curious and friendly child whose interest in the world around him is evident during a walk through the city, where Bishop “dragged backwards on [Rayber’s] hand, always attracted by something they had already passed. Every block or so he would squat down to pick up a stick or a piece of trash and have to be pulled up and along” (107). Bishop’s wonderment is not confined to the city, and the trip he and Rayber make to Powderhead shows most powerfully the engulfing amazement Bishop displays for the world around him. Bishop “jumped out [of the car] and made for the blackberry bushes, attracted by the wasps that buzzed over them. Rayber leapt out and grabbed him just before he reached for one. Gingerly he picked the child a blackberry and handed it to him. The little boy studied it and then, with his fallen smile, returned it to him as if they were performing a ceremony” (184). Even wasps and blackberries are something magical to Bishop, though the magic is lost on those around him. When they finally arrive at Powderhead, “Bishop could barely walk for gaping. He lifted his face to stare open-mouthed above him as if he were in some vast overwhelming edifice. His hat fell off and Rayber picked it up and clamped it on his head again and pulled him on. Somewhere below them out of the silence a bird sounded four crystal notes. The child stopped, his breath held” (184). While Rayber and Tarwater are haunted by Powderhead and populate it with their own traumas and demons, Bishop is enchanted by the beauty of the homestead. For Bishop, Powderhead is new and amazing and has not been sullied by the convolutions Rayber and Tarwater fill the place with. The almost constant description of Bishop’s smile and his positive and resilient attitude toward the world around him show Bishop to be indestructibly innocent. It is only when Bishop is filtered

through Tarwater's hatred and jealousy or Rayber's incessant intolerance that he is described as anything less than radiant and precious.

Bishop is fascinated with Tarwater, and this hovers somewhere between charming and, given his death at Tarwater's hands, tragic. At their first meeting, Bishop creeps ever closer to Tarwater, "not five feet from him and was coming every instant closer with his lop-sided smile" and is continuously "sticking out his hand to touch him" (92). Upon Tarwater's arrival, Rayber fears "Bishop would drive [Tarwater] away with all his friendliness. He was always creeping up to touch him" (111). Tarwater is not won over by Bishop's attention, however innocent it may be, and yet Bishop's antics at the park are endearing and show a child who is full of wonder:

Water rushed out of the mouth of a stone lion's head into a shallow pool below and as soon as the dim-witted boy saw the water, he gave a whoop and galloped off toward it, flapping his arms like something released from a cage. Tarwater saw exactly where he was heading, knew exactly what he was going to do. "Too late, goddamit," the schoolteacher muttered, "he's in." The child stood grinning in the pool lifting his feet slowly up and down as if he liked the feel of the wet seeping into his shoes. (164)

It is important to note that this event is filtered through Tarwater's subconscious. When Rayber recounts the same event, he sees that "Water rushed from the mouth of a stone lion's head into a shallow pool and the little boy was flying toward it, his arms flailing like a windmill" (145); where Tarwater sees an animalistic dimwit released from a cage, Rayber sees an animated little boy even if he still cannot appreciate Bishop's wonderment. For Bishop, the simple act of standing in water, an attraction that will shape his fate, brings joy that neither Rayber nor Tarwater can grasp. Bishop's elation and appreciation of life is lost on his family, so they describe him as animalistic, infantile,

and dim-witted. Bishop's disability prevents him from fully grasping these reactions, however, so he retains his innocence and genuine responses to life.

Bishop's reactions are as intense as they are authentic. When Tarwater frightens Bishop at their first meeting, Bishop's fear elicits his father's protection. After Tarwater swats at Bishop, Bishop

let out a bellow startlingly loud. He clambered up his father's leg, pulling himself up by the schoolteacher's pajama coat until he was almost on his shoulder. "All right, all right," the schoolteacher said, "there, there, shut up, it's all right, he didn't mean to hit you," and he righted the child on his back and tried to slide him off but the little boy hung on, thrusting his head against his father's neck and never taking his eyes off Tarwater. (92)

Bishop's reaction to Tarwater's cruelty is to run to his father and to nestle his head against Rayber's neck. This highly visual and physical moment evokes an intimacy between father and son that in some way softens Rayber's crass entreaties for Bishop to "shut up." Tarwater picks up on this intimacy when he interprets this connection as "a vision of the schoolteacher and his child as inseparably joined," but he contorts this bond when he notices "The schoolteacher's face was red and pained" and decides this must mean, to Rayber, that "The child might have been a deformed part of himself that had accidentally been revealed" (93). Tarwater's jealousy and dislike for Bishop cloud his judgment so that, at first, he can only view Bishop as an embarrassment and burden to his father.

While Bishop has a unique personality, he also exhibits duality with Tarwater. O'Connor's contemporary, Claire Rosenfield, in "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double" (1963), attempts to identify moments of mirroring

or doubling in *The Violent Bear it Away*. Rosenfield claims “duality inspires both terror and awe” (326) and notes “the novelist who consciously or unconsciously exploits psychological doubles may either juxtapose or duplicate two characters; the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self” (328). In tantalizing fashion, however, O’Connor’s characters cannot be split so easily into such dichotomies; Tarwater is not a conventional teenage boy, yet neither is he free and uninhibited. He is, however, a criminal. Bishop could also appear in both categories, since the woman at the lake is more accepting of Bishop than of Tarwater, of whom she is suspicious from the start, while the dancers who are so offended by Bishop’s attention offer a moment of social unacceptance. Bishop is by no means criminal, but he absolutely represents a free and uninhibited self. While the two may jostle about in their categories, they are both the same and the opposite of one another.

Rosenfield follows the image of the devil on Tarwater’s shoulder, focusing her study on this embodiment of duality, but her observations are particularly insightful when applied to the mirroring between Tarwater and Bishop. Rosenfield notes that Tarwater “does baptize the idiot child Bishop according to his uncle’s demand, but he drowns that child in the process, according to the command of his second self, ‘the stranger’” (338). While this observation is astute, it positions Bishop as little more than a stop along Tarwater’s twisted and tortured path to self, when in fact the mirroring between Tarwater and Bishop is crucial because Tarwater is not only aware of it on some level, but is also threatened by it. Tarwater reacts to the doubling between himself and Bishop with just

the “terror and awe” Rosenfield mentions, and this fuels Tarwater’s behavior toward Bishop. Tarwater sees Bishop’s mental disability as an insult in part because he sees himself in Bishop and is aware that Bishop’s life with Rayber was supposed to be his. If Rayber had succeeded in taking him from Powderhead, he would have been raised in that house and he would be behind the opening door, not Bishop. The mirroring Tarwater perceives in their situations makes Bishop’s mental disability all the more offensive to him.

Tarwater is also linked to Bishop early on when Tarwater pretends to have a disability to avoid going to school. When a truant officer comes to inquire about Tarwater’s absence from school, Tarwater adopts a disabled persona: Tarwater’s “eyes were open but not well-focused. His head rolled uncontrollably on his slack shoulders and his tongue lolled in his open mouth” (18). Upon seeing Tarwater, the officer immediately backs down from his mission. Mason plays up the scenario as well:

“He aint bright,” the old man said, “but he’s a mighty good boy. He knows to come when you call him.” “Yes,” the truant officer said, “well yes, but it might be best to leave him in peace.” “I don’t know, he might take to schooling,” the old man said. “He aint had a fit for going on two months.” “I speck he better stay at home,” the officer said. “I wouldn’t want to put a strain on him,” and he commenced to speak of other things. (18)

While this episode is but a small vignette it establishes both the discomfort (though not outright negativity) the outside community has toward those with disabilities as well as Tarwater’s own ignorance of and insensitivity toward disability. The truant officer is not harsh or offensive in his decision to leave Tarwater be, but the immediate shift in conversation clearly displays his discomfort. The impact of this scene is to draw a line

connecting Tarwater and Bishop through mental disability, real or pretend, and demonstrates Tarwater's disrespect toward those with disabilities, while foreshadowing the callous way he later interacts with Bishop.

The truant officer is trying to be kind and respectful by not forcing Tarwater to attend school, and by not asking Mason questions about his condition. By not enforcing Tarwater's attendance, however, the truant officer displays a conviction that those with special needs either cannot handle school or cannot benefit from schooling. Mason holds this view as well, as his scheme with Tarwater demonstrates. This moment, occurring so early in the novel, sets the tone that those with disabilities are confined to their homes and are not given the tools to grow. Bishop's schooling, then, makes the scene at Powderhead seem all the more backward. Bishop has become autonomous in many ways, and Rayber attributes this to Bishop's schooling. Rayber thinks about Bishop's progress: "In the winter he sent him to a school for exceptional children and he had made great strides. He could wash himself, dress himself, feed himself, go to the toilet by himself and make peanut butter sandwiches though sometimes he put the bread inside" (112). Bishop is not learning reading or arithmetic, but he is learning how to take care of himself. He is *learning*, while Tarwater actively avoids the growth school affords.

A final, but powerful, way in which Tarwater both perceives and is offended by Bishop's mirroring himself is in Mason's attention toward Bishop:

The old man stared at [Bishop], his lips parting slowly until his mouth hung open. He looked as if he beheld an unspeakable mystery. The little boy made an unintelligible noise and pushed the door almost shut, hiding himself all but one spectacled eye. Suddenly a tremendous indignation seized Tarwater. He eyed the small face peering from the crack. He

searched his mind fiercely for the right word to hurl at it. Finally he said in a slow emphatic voice, "Before you was here, *I* was here." The old man caught his shoulder and pulled him back. "He don't have good sense," he said. "Can't you see he don't have good sense? He don't know what you're talking about." The boy grew more furious than ever. He swung around on his heel to leave. (31)

Interestingly, Bishop's lack of understanding renders Tarwater momentarily speechless as well. When Tarwater does come up with a response it is dramatic and convoluted, and ultimately ineffective. Tarwater's reaction is intense and strange, but what is clear is that he resents Bishop for his uncle's fascination with him. Tarwater does not see any of the power or magnificence in Bishop that he so desperately covets for himself, so he closes his eyes to any possibility of Bishop's worth. In Tarwater's glory-obsessed mind, Bishop has no redeeming qualities, so he does not understand Mason's affection for him. He would be jealous of anyone Mason cared for, but Bishop's disability is an easy feature for Tarwater to focus on and despise. Bishop's disability is only offensive to Tarwater secondarily; his main grievance is the way those around him go to lengths to look out for Bishop and his well being (spiritual or otherwise) when he himself feels he has only ever known the love of a prophet for his pupil.

Bishop carries such significance in Tarwater's struggle that critics often overlook Bishop's worth outside of Tarwater's or even Rayber's journey. Academic focus on Bishop centers almost exclusively on his death, and while this is certainly important, it can only be discussed here after exploring his life. Critical analysis has all but dismissed who Bishop is apart from his connection to Tarwater's prophetic calling, but it is imperative to examine Bishop as a character unto himself. Timothy J. Basselin begins to

do this in *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity* (2013), focusing on how Bishop's disability functions within the novel. Basselin notes O'Connor's early works often portray disability as "the grotesque-as-metaphor-for-original-sin" (76). Basselin claims that the novel utilizes this agenda, but also employs disability to "say that the grotesque is the authentic good, and our inability to perceive it as good signifies how truly we are overcome by original sin" (76). Basselin's argument, however, focuses on Rayber's complicated view of his son, where Bishop's disability proves to Rayber's scientific mind that there must be no God, since through his disability Bishop is "useless." Rayber's inexplicable and overwhelming love for his son, on the other hand, is likewise useless and consumes him in a way that he cannot rationalize. While these observations focus on Bishop's disability, it is not Rayber's response to his son that signifies Bishop's disability indicates authentic good, but rather Bishop's characterization that accomplishes this. The narrative's portrayal of Bishop reveals a character complete with likes, dislikes, interests, fears and quirks. Surrounding characters (and critics) may disregard Bishop's personality, but his individuality cannot be denied.

There is a split between the narrative's description of Bishop as friendly, happy, and loyal, and the Bishop who Rayber and Tarwater often describe as empty, an idiot, and a mistake. It is this split that creates sympathy for the child whose soul is in the balance, while his life is minimized. Rayber insists his son is a mistake of nature; he warns Tarwater to "Just forget Bishop exists. You haven't been asked to have anything to do with him. He's just a mistake of nature. Try not even to be aware of him" (116).

Tarwater views Bishop in an even more unfavorable light and is convinced Bishop is placed in his path as a sort of prophetic temptation; Tarwater taunts Rayber by describing Bishop as a hog: “‘He eats like a hog and he don’t think no more than a hog and when he dies, he’ll rot like a hog. Me and you too,’ he said, looking back at the schoolteacher’s mottled face, ‘will rot like hogs. The only difference between me and you and a hog is me and you can calculate, but there ain’t any difference between him and one’” (116). Such callous descriptions seem outrageous in the novel; just as Tarwater hopes to get a reaction from Rayber when describing his son as a hog, so the reader is disturbed by the negativity the child receives.

Rayber and Tarwater judge Bishop by their own standards and hold him responsible for their fears. The split between the way Bishop is perceived and the way he is presented, coupled with his tragic death, show both Rayber and Tarwater to be wrong. If Bishop’s self was unimportant, as his family believes, his presence would not be so pervasive in the novel. The narrative sets up these dichotomies, where both father and cousin undervalue and deny a unique existence while Bishop is continually shown to be an individual, to show just how erroneous these characterizations are. Rayber and Tarwater discuss Bishop as a vacant idiot again and again, but the narrative refuses to let the reader believe it.

While Bishop is often undervalued by his family, his mental disability is frequently on their minds, and each character has an explanation for it. Mason believes Bishop is disabled because God made him that way to preserve his innocence, and perhaps punish a wayward Rayber, and he passes down his convictions about Rayber and

Bishop's mother, Bernice Bishop. Mason claims "the Lord ... had preserved the one child [Rayber] had got out of [Bernice Bishop] from being corrupted by such parents. He had preserved him in the only possible way: the child was dim-witted. The old man would pause here and let the weight of this mystery sink in on Tarwater" (9). Tarwater adopts the same conviction at first, believing God has spared Bishop from evil by creating him in such a way, although the lack of glamour in being called to baptize an "idiot child" consumes Tarwater for a time. Mason entreats Tarwater to carry out the mission, "If by the time I die,' he had said to Tarwater, 'I haven't got him baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission the Lord sends you.'" Tarwater, however, is not convinced. "The boy doubted very much that his first mission would be to baptize a dim-witted child. 'Oh no it won't be,' he said. 'He don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me'" (9). Tarwater resents the role Bishop plays in Mason's plan for Tarwater's life; upon seeing Bishop,

the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared for him. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. (90)

Tarwater's resentment toward Bishop is clear when he contemplates "The Lord out of dust had created him, had made him blood and nerve and mind, had made him to bleed and weep and think, and set him in a world of loss and fire all to baptize one idiot child that He need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish. He tried to shout, 'NO!' but it was like trying to shout in his sleep" (90). Tarwater rejects his

calling to baptize Bishop, not from an objection to baptism or prophets, but from a resentment of the lack of grandeur and magnificence of baptizing *Bishop*. The calling is not on the epic level Tarwater hungers for.

Bishop's mother responds to her son in a more calloused way than many of the other satellite characters in the novel:

By temperament and training she was ready to handle an exceptional child, but not one as exceptional as Bishop, not one bearing her own family name and the face of "that horrible old man." She had returned once in the last two years and demanded that he put Bishop in an institution because she said he could not adequately care for him – though it was plain from the look of him that he thrived like an air plant. (181)

Bernice abandons her son because his disability is too close to her. Her demand that Rayber institutionalize Bishop, however, is the truly cruel action because not only does Rayber report Bishop *is* doing well, but she would rather have her child in an institution than with his father. She initially leaves because she cannot bear to be around her child, and then she returns because she does not want her child around. The way in which this information is presented is crucial because it creates sympathy for Bishop. When Bernice abandons her husband and son, it is a tragic family moment, but it is a flaw on her part; she does not have the strength to be with her disabled son on a daily basis. When she returns, however, and demands Bishop be institutionalized, she is faulting both Rayber's ability to care for Bishop and Bishop's ability to exist in the non-institutional world. Rayber's response is to "[knock] her not quite halfway across the room" (181). Rayber's indignation is understandable since Bishop's progress and his attachment to and comfort with his father have already been established in the narrative when Bernice arrives.

Bishop is well adjusted where he is, and when his own mother demands he go to a facility run by strangers, she is treating him as an object that can be tossed aside when no longer wanted.

In addition to familial reactions, Bishop has two encounters at the lake with non-family which represent both the negative and sympathetic attitudes of the larger community. The group of dancing teenagers at the restaurant demonstrates a negative response to disability. The description of the teenagers is not flattering: “They danced with a furious stern concentration. Tarwater, his eyes dark and distant, stared through them. They might have been insects buzzing across the surface of his vision. When the music whined to a stop, they clambered back to their table and sprawled in their chairs” (190). The group is not enjoying the dance, although there is presumably no other reason to dance than for enjoyment. Tarwater is unimpressed, and the teens return to their table with a certain sloth.

Bishop *is* impressed, though his response when the dancing stops is indicative of his own nature rather than any sort of feather in the dancers’ caps: “Bishop was entranced. He stood up in his chair, watching them, his head hanging forward as if any moment it might drop off.” When the dance ends, “The child was jumping up and down in his chair, roaring his disappointment” (190). Bishop has probably never seen dancing before (indeed, it is difficult to imagine Rayber dancing in front of his child) and he reacts with characteristic fascination, awe, and appreciation. The dancers, however, respond to Bishop with indignation: “As soon as the dancers saw him, he stopped making the noise and stood still, devouring them with his gape. An angry silence fell over them.

Their look was shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it” (190). The teens are not confused or uncomfortable; rather, they are “shocked and affronted” as if Bishop has done something wrong, as if his existence is somehow wrong. Their outraged reaction represents a possible, if not common, reaction to those with mental disability, both in O’Connor’s time and today. The dancers see something different from themselves and do not have the scope or maturity to see Bishop for what he is: a little boy who likes dancing. Rayber’s reaction to this indignation betrays his love for his son as clearly as any action could: “With pleasure Rayber could have dashed across the room and swung his lifted chair in their faces” (190). Rayber resents the group of strangers because their judgment of Bishop dehumanizes him and Rayber, who has experienced Bishop’s unique personality more than anyone, is offended on his son’s behalf.

The woman who works the front desk at the lake resort is perhaps the most sympathetic character to interact with Bishop. Rather than ignore him or be uncomfortable around him, she seems to be fascinated with him. She does not treat Bishop as if he is just like everyone else, but rather lavishes him with attention. When they first arrive at the lake,

Bishop was a few feet away, gaping at her. “What’s your name, Sugar pie?” she asked. “His name is Bishop,” Rayber said shortly. He was always irked when the child was stared at. The woman tilted her head sympathetically. “I reckon you’re taking him off to give his mother a little rest,” she said, her eyes full of curiosity and compassion. “I have him all the time,” he said and added before he could stop himself, “his mother abandoned him.” “No!” she breathed. “Well,” she said, “it takes all kinds of women. I couldn’t leave a child like that.” You can’t even take your eyes off him, he thought irritably and began to fill out the card. “Are the

boats for rent?" he asked without looking up. "Free for guests," she said, "but anybody gets drowned, that's their lookout. How about him? Can he sit still in a boat?" "Nothing ever happens to him," he murmured, finishing the card and turning it around to her. (152)

The woman's curiosity makes Rayber very uncomfortable, and yet it does not seem to come from a place of malice – she is not gawking at Bishop, but rather she is giving him her full attention. Rayber does not like her staring at Bishop, yet her kindness is evident, if not somewhat closed-minded. Her absorption with Bishop lasts throughout their stay; later, "The woman had drawn him to an icecooler and produced a green popsickle which she held up for him while she gazed fascinated into his mysterious face" (168). When Tarwater yells at Bishop in front of her, she both comes to Bishop's defense and displays ignorance: "'Mind how you talk to one of them there, you boy!' the woman hissed. [Tarwater] looked at her as if it were the first time she had spoken to him. 'Them there what?' he murmured. 'That there kind,' she said, looking at him fiercely as if he had profaned the holy" (155). The woman is standing up for Bishop, encouraging Tarwater to be kind to him, but the reason she gives for this necessary kindness is that Bishop is disabled. The woman implies that those with mental disabilities need special treatment, and while perhaps special treatment is in order to reverse the especially negative treatment Bishop sometimes receives because of his disability, the woman's repeated categorizing Bishop as "that kind" limits his humanity. Whatever "kind" Bishop is, it is not the same category that she and Tarwater are in. Tarwater's response here is fascinating; while Tarwater resents Bishop for his disability at first, that facet of the boy has been eclipsed by his relevance to Tarwater's fate. It is as if Tarwater has forgotten

about the initial insult he felt over Bishop's disability and is now only thinking of Bishop's unbaptized state as a threat to his own attempts at independence from his prophetic calling.

It is necessary to discuss Rayber's feelings toward his son last, both because they are myriad and conflicting and also because they are inseparable from a discussion of Bishop's death. Rayber holds two views on his son's mental disability. In one instance, born of despair and morbidity, Rayber acknowledges that he "did not believe that he himself was formed in the image and likeness of God but that Bishop was he had no doubt" (113). Basselin's reading of this moment is that "one can interpret Rayber's naming Bishop as being in the image of God as Rayber's sarcastic view of God, a God who is made in the image of the imbecile Bishop," since sarcasm "fits well with a good majority of Rayber's philosophy" (75-76). Outside of this moment, Rayber explains his son solely through terms of mistakes and accidents of nature. Rayber's "normal way of looking on Bishop was as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate," where "The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution" (113). Rayber argues against his uncle's desire to baptize Bishop, believing that "You could slosh water on him for the rest of his life and he'd still be an idiot. Five years old for all eternity, useless forever" (34). Rayber is not concerned with Bishop's soul, but rather with the limitations he will encounter in this life. The thought of Bishop as God's image operates in a paradoxical way – Rayber is scorning the image of God by claiming, as Basselin observes, his mirror is a mentally disabled boy. He is bitterly rejecting his uncle's faith, in essence claiming there can be no God because he cannot understand why God would

create his son to be disabled. In a confrontation with Mason, Rayber taunts his uncle to “Ask the Lord why He made [Bishop] an idiot in the first place, uncle. Tell him I want to know why!” (33-34).

The other side of Rayber’s thought is that if Bishop is made in God’s likeness, both Bishop and God are pure, innocent, and good. Rayber is linking Bishop to the old euphemism that people with special needs are God’s children, or children touched by God. The radical split here occurs not because he still falters about his faith (or lack thereof); Rayber has almost completely shut down the religious side of himself. The reason Rayber has such conflicting ideas is because he feels such extreme love for his son (even though he wishes to control his emotions) that he can be consumed by it. While he initially demeans and shuts out Bishop in favor of Tarwater, Rayber absolutely loves his son in what Basselin considers to be “no fuller expression of the good in O’Connor’s work” (77). In one of O’Connor’s most astonishing passages, Rayber explores his “horrifying love” for Bishop:

For the most part Rayber lived with him without being painfully aware of his presence but the moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed for days, and trembling for his sanity.... The little boy was part of a simple equation that required no further solution, except at the moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love. Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man’s walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk. If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him – powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise.... The love that would overcome him ... was not the kind that could be used for the child’s improvement or his own. It was love

without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. And it only began with Bishop. It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated. (113-114)

Rayber experiences intense, painful feelings of love for his son – a love that is unpredictable, often uncontained, and most importantly, the gateway to all of Rayber's emotions.

Rayber's reaction to Bishop's diagnosis of mental disability speaks to his conflicted attitude toward his son. Bishop's doctor advises Rayber, "You should be grateful his health is good. In addition to this, I've seen them born blind as well, some without arms and legs, and one with a heart outside.' [Rayber] had lurched up, almost ready to strike the man. 'How can I be grateful,' he had hissed, 'when one – just one – is born with a heart outside?' 'You'd better try,' the doctor had said" (136). Rayber misses the doctor's point, crass as it may be. The doctor enjoins Rayber to appreciate Bishop as he is, and warns him that Bishop's mental disability could have come with severe physical disabilities as well. Rayber, however, cannot move past the outrage that Bishop is disabled at all and cannot see the silver lining in Bishop's diagnosis. Rayber can only see the possibilities removed from Bishop and does not acknowledge the gift that Bishop is to him. Bishop's life means nothing to Tarwater and often means nothing to Rayber. They have looked into Bishop only as far as his disability and have concluded that either Bishop has no interior self, or the self that is present is of no consequence. And yet Bishop refuses to be ignored in the novel.

Rayber feels cheated in some cosmic way by Bishop's disability and he refers to his son time and again as a mistake, an accident. But Rayber cannot stamp out his love for his son. Rayber

could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus on Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself. Then the whole world would become his idiot child. He had thought what he would have to do if anything happened to Bishop. He would have with one supreme effort to resist the recognition; with very nerve and muscle and thought, he would have to resist feeling anything at all, thinking anything at all, he would have to anesthetize his life. (181)

This scene offers a chilling moment of foreshadowing where Rayber predicts not only that something will indeed happen to Bishop, but also that his life will become barren. It will not be his choice or by his will, but the end result will be the same – Rayber's life will essentially be over without his son. When Rayber imagines ridding his life of Tarwater, his plans center on Bishop:

He thought with horror of being stuck with [Tarwater] for good and began to consider ways that he might hasten his departure. He knew he would never leave as long as Bishop was around. The thought flew through his mind that he might put Bishop in an institution for a few weeks. He was shaken and turned his mind to other things. For a while he dozed and dreamed that he and Bishop were speeding away in the car, escaping safely from a lowering tornado-like cloud. (199)

Rayber cannot tolerate the thought of being without Bishop, and also imagines his freedom and safety *with* Bishop. For all his talk of Bishop's social uselessness, even in his fantasies of safety he is with Bishop.

In much the same way, when Rayber tries to drown Bishop, he only falters when he considers his life without his son. Rayber had taken Bishop to the beach intending to

drown him, and once in the water, Rayber “pushed down again angrily with all his force until the struggling ceased under his hands. He stood sweating in the water, his own mouth as slack as the child’s had been. The body, caught by an undertow, almost got away from him, but he managed to come to himself and snatch it” (142). It is only after this horrible action that Rayber considers the consequence of what he has done as he looks at Bishop’s body: “as he looked at it, he had a moment of complete terror in which he envisioned his life without the child. He began to shout frantically” (142). It is interesting that Bishop’s body is just “it,” as if Rayber cannot bring himself to label the thing in front of him as his son. Doing so would destroy the detachment Rayber strives for each day. However, Rayber cannot escape the truth of what he has done, and so he cries for help. Bishop’s life is suddenly, if only momentarily, more important to Rayber than the life he is denied because of his disability.

Rayber’s feelings toward Bishop show Bishop is loveable and deserving of love. Rayber’s love for Bishop is the greatest, if not only, example of familial love in the novel, and since it is between a distant father and a disabled son, it is essential that Rayber’s feelings for his son be reclaimed from a long tradition of critical analysis. Many critics claim that Rayber’s realization that he will feel no pain over his son’s death is evidence that he does not love his son. Thelma J. Shinn’s landmark piece, “Flannery O’Connor and the Violence of Grace” (1968), has set the stage for critical interpretation. Shinn traces Rayber’s reaction to Bishop’s death through his conscious rejection of spiritual redemption. She notes “Rayber had had the opportunity to be saved when he realized that Bishop was dead, but he had already made his decision to reject grace before

that” (72), pointing to Rayber’s determination that he “kept himself upright on a very narrow line between madness and emptiness, and when the time came for him to lose his balance, he intended to lurch toward emptiness and fall on the side of his choice” (*Violent* 115). Therefore, Shinn concludes that “Rayber’s lack of pain illustrates his severance from God; he is confined to the painless emptiness of Limbo and denied the purifying pain of Purgatory” (72). For Shinn and many critics after, Rayber’s lack of pain (and subsequently his emptiness) is the fate he chose for himself when he denied spirituality.

This reading relies heavily on O’Connor’s own purported beliefs about religion, but the text itself supports a different interpretation. Rayber has not newly rejected his faith – he has long lived a life without religion. The scene surrounding Rayber’s collapse focuses on Rayber’s realization that his son is dead, and Shinn’s interpretation removes Bishop and his murder from this scene entirely. This is not some nameless trauma – this moment for Rayber is wholly about his son and what his son means to him. Rayber’s peculiar reaction to Bishop’s death shows his intense love for his son. Rayber responds in two ways: he realizes he will feel no pain, and he collapses. Rayber will never again feel pain because he will never again feel anything at all since Bishop is gone. After hearing the struggle between Tarwater and Bishop, Rayber remains at the window of his room, trying to remember something: “It came to him finally as something so distant and vague in his mind that it might already have happened, a long time ago. It was that tomorrow they would drag the pond for Bishop” (203). It is at this moment, when the magnitude of his loss is put into the practical, ascetic terms he clings to, that Rayber truly grasps what has happened. Unlike Rayber’s unsuccessful attempt to drown Bishop,

where the boy's body is *it*, Rayber's realization here is not that they will pull out *it* or *the body* but rather that they will drag the pond for *Bishop*. Rayber "stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed" (203). Rayber's lack of pain is not from any paucity of love for his son, but rather from the sudden and permanent loss of all emotion. As he feared, the whole world became his idiot son, and as his son is dead, so the world is dead to him.

Rayber's collapse is a strong physical reaction to a mental distress that is too often overlooked. Rayber expresses his love for Bishop almost entirely through physical signs; he holds Bishop comfortingly even while telling him to shut up when Tarwater yells at him, and sits quietly with his chin on Bishop's head as a form of relaxation when they are in the park. Upon arriving at the lake, "Bishop climbed out of the car and thrust his face against his father's side. Absently Rayber put his hand on the little boy's ear and rubbed it gingerly, his fingers tingling as if they touched the sensitive scar of some old wound" (151). The physical, rather than emotional, nature of Rayber's response to his son's death is indicative not of Rayber's callousness, but of the manner in which he has always related to his son. He does not cry out just as he never cooed to his son – in happiness Rayber held Bishop, and in despair he collapses. It is a reaction he cannot reason himself out of – his body is reacting to what his psyche can no longer face. When Rayber listens to the struggle between nephew and son that will surely end in his son's death, his physical description is that of agony: "He clenched his teeth. The muscles in his face

contracted and revealed lines of pain beneath harder than bone. He set his jaw” (202).

Rayber is not tense because he is keeping himself from saving Bishop – he knows that he is too far away; he is frozen to the spot with impotence. Rayber’s love for his son is so important that it is essential that it be the last thing Rayber ever feels.

Bishop’s death is of course crucial to not only Rayber, but Tarwater as well.

Popular critical interpretations posit the baptism/murder as the central action of the story.

Jason Ambrosiano, in “‘From the Blood of Abel to His Own’: Intersubjectivity and Salvation in Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear it Away*” (2007), views Bishop’s death as a necessary sacrifice, converging from Mason, Rayber, and Tarwater’s shared prophetic and familial bond, fulfilling Tarwater’s journey to know God. Ambrosiano notes, “Alive, Bishop sustains the prophets’ spiritual/somatic bond; as sacrifice he affirms it. As bodily continuation of the prophets’ transcendent history, Bishop is a ‘logical’ means of converging the violent irrationality shared by his relatives into their prophetic realization manifested in Tarwater” (138). Ambrosiano emphasizes Bishop’s importance to his relative’s stories, but fails to address Bishop’s individuality. Bishop does not share in the prophetic calling of his kin, though he is present in each of their struggles with and against religion. Ambrosiano views Bishop as “a central character in all of (his kin’s) narratives and the kindred point where they all meet. He catalyzes the violent energies and desires shared by the three, and thus he inevitably shapes their product” (138). Ambrosiano sees Bishop’s real value in his death, and in the change his death affords in Tarwater, when “Tarwater’s desired shout from God reached him from

the blood of Abel, not Cain” (138). Thus, for Ambrosiano, Bishop’s death is most significant in its baptismal aspect, as a spiritual catalyst for Tarwater.

Joseph Zornado rejects the notion that Bishop needs baptism at all in “A Becoming Habit: Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction of Unknowing” (1997). Zornado notes, “For some readers and critics of O’Connor problematizing the ritual of baptism ... constitutes a violation of her fiction that, ultimately, threatens to erode a critical consensus some think exists about the relationship between her faith and fiction. For these critics the outer ritual of baptism and the inner transformation are one” (28), and further reflects that “Tarwater’s baptism/drowning of Bishop obscures, and even undermines, traditional Orthodox definitions of baptism and dogmatic explanations that might be applied in order to make sense of it” (34). While Zornado does recognize O’Connor’s belief in the baptismal ritual, he ultimately suggests the ritual’s futility for Bishop. Zornado argues, “By the end of the novel baptism has become a central symbol not of grace, stability, essence, and truth, but of difference, of the gap, the abyss” (49). According to Zornado, because of Bishop’s mental disability his “status as an infant corrupted by Adam’s sin suddenly becomes suspect, and as a child, Bishop cannot understand the ritual and the question remains whether he requires it for the remission of sins. Further, the name Bishop clearly suggests that he already belongs to the kingdom of heaven” (51-52). Ultimately, the baptismal act seeks to work out Tarwater’s conflicting directives, but has no value for Bishop.

While Zornado does not try to twist Bishop’s death into something positive or necessary, as many critics before him do, he fails to recognize the role Bishop’s

personality plays in such a scenario. Zornado points to Bishop's disability, age, and name as reasons why he does not need baptism, but it is Bishop's personality that creates tragedy within the novel. As Zornado has shown, Bishop does not need to be baptized. As I have shown, he does not deserve to be drowned.

Finally, Bishop's death is not the turning point for Tarwater that it is often interpreted as. When Tarwater drowns Bishop, he does not stop to think about the life he is destroying or the presence he is taking from the world. Tarwater's only concerns after drowning Bishop, or at least the only concerns he lends voice to, focus on the act of baptism. When Tarwater hitches a ride with a truck driver, his preoccupation is clear: Tarwater confesses, "I baptized him." "Huh?" the man said. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to," [Tarwater] said breathlessly. Then in a calmer voice he said, "The words just came out of themselves but it don't mean nothing. You can't be born again." "Make sense," the man said. "I only meant to drown him," the boy said" (209). Tarwater is not disturbed with killing his cousin, but rather with the unintentional baptism that simultaneously takes place. Bishop refuses to be forgotten entirely, however. Tarwater asks a local boy for water; "As [the water] touched the deeper parts of his face, a shock ran through him, as if he had never been touched by water before. He looked down into a grey clear pool, down and down to where two silent serene eyes were gazing at him. He tore his head away from the bucket and stumbled backwards" (222). Perhaps Tarwater sees Mason's eyes, perhaps Bishop's, but this moment shows Tarwater is still fleeing from his crime and refusing to face his actions. Even after his death, Tarwater cannot appreciate Bishop for his soul. Bishop's personality does not slow Tarwater's hand.

Bishop is drowned in the holy water Tarwater has been so desperate to escape, but this is not Tarwater's redemptive moment. He does not leave the lake a changed and determined prophet. Tarwater continually acts through fire, so Bishop's watery death symbolically has little meaning for Tarwater. It is only after the burning cigarettes and the burning liquor drug him enough to be sexually violated by a man who gives him a ride that Tarwater awakens with burned eyes and his prophetic mission burned into his consciousness. Tarwater must be cleansed in fire rather than water before he is to be awakened to his destiny, but the baptism, this massive moment in the story, takes place in water. This is a strong narrative clue that the moment is not as pivotal for Tarwater as it appears to be, or should be. The scene's pointlessness, then, is the narrative's strongest way to create sympathy for Bishop.

Bishop's bond with and affinity for water, rather than fire, links him to an old, fluid, natural world – he evokes creation and repeatedly conjures images of timelessness. Rayber describes Bishop as looking “like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence” (111), and thinks of Bishop as “dim and ancient, like a child who had been a child for centuries” (90). Bishop is linked to the natural world and the timelessness thereof and there is something eternal in his joyful and awestruck personality. Where Tarwater seeks to evade and destroy, Bishop repeatedly appreciates and enjoys the world around him. The fact that the pivotal moment in the novel is not *Tarwater's* pivotal spiritual moment indicates that he is not the only center of the story, even if the narrative focuses largely on him. Bishop's death may be at Tarwater's hand, but Tarwater does not retain the control he so desperately strives for – the climax happens

in water rather than fire, and he does the exact thing he was acting to avoid: baptize Bishop. Tarwater may take Bishop's life but he cannot take away his significance, and removing the moment of Bishop's death entirely from Tarwater's control grants Bishop power even in death.

Chapter 2

Knowing the Unknowable:

Faulkner's Mentally Disabled Characters

The Sound and the Fury

William Faulkner offers the same sympathetic and critical conclusion of the characters' treatment as Flannery O'Connor, but does so in a very different way. While O'Connor's narratives employ the extreme mistreatment of Lucynell and Bishop and the exaggerated negativity of their peers toward them to explore the injustice toward characters with special needs, Faulkner goes straight to the source by granting his mentally disabled characters extended, dedicated narrative attention to view their plight directly. He too offers up scenes of extreme mistreatment and of characters with mental disabilities being treated as grotesque and ultimately alien, but he explores the psyche of his mentally disabled characters to portray them as infinitely complex and human, which makes their peer's treatment of them as mindless and worthless seem so staggeringly unfair. Faulkner represents his mentally disabled characters in much more depth and spends more narrative time focusing on them than O'Connor does, and the result is more developed characters with complex interiorities. While O'Connor presents her characters in relation to the families around them, Faulkner presents Benjy's inner thoughts, his very consciousness, by granting him first person narration, and spends a great deal of narrative time on Ike's solitary journey, exploring him and his motivations without the filter of the surrounding community. Faulkner brings his audience to not only sympathize with these characters, but also to come closer to *knowing* them.

The Sound and the Fury (1929) tells the story of the Compson family through the narratives of the three Compson brothers: Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. Benjy, the youngest brother, is the first narrator the reader encounters and his severe mental disability is made evident through his limited and largely sensory narrative. Although three of the four narratives in the novel, including Benjy's, take place on Easter weekend of 1928, Benjy seems to exist in his memories, moving between times when his beloved sister Caddy is present in his childhood some thirty years earlier and events that drastically change his life, such as his castration. The fourth and final narrator represents an outside voice and dedicates some time to following Benjy and Dilsey to Easter services.

Benjy's narrative has received ample attention. The body of literary criticism surrounding Faulkner's breakthrough novel is as substantial and daunting as the novel itself. Benjy's narrative has sparked debate and interpretation as much as, if not more so than, any other section in the novel. Much of the criticism surrounding Benjy focuses on the ways in which his narrative speaks to a larger tradition of interpreting experience and telling one's own story. L. Moffitt Cecil, in "A Rhetoric for Benjy" (1970), displays the interest many scholars have in the narrative value of Benjy's section: "When William Faulkner decided to filter Section 1 of *The Sound and the Fury* through the consciousness of Benjy Compson, he took upon himself as author the extraordinary task of improvising a language suitable to a mute, an idiot" (32). Cecil further expounds, "It is the fact of Benjy's idiocy which compounded Faulkner's problems and demanded that he effect the major authorial miracle of causing not only a mute to 'speak,' but a blithering idiot to

narrate the first section of *The Sound and the Fury*” (34). The events and experiences Benjy recounts, and the fact that he narrates at all, have sustained almost a century of critical interest.

Olga Vickery lays the foundation for most critical approaches to Benjy’s narrative when she recounts that, “Our first impression of the Benjy section is that it presents a state of utter chaos for which the only possible justification is the fact that Benjy is an idiot and therefore has the right to be confused” (32). Benjy’s forgiven simplicity is echoed by André Bleikasten, who remarks in *The Most Splendid Failure* (1976) that “Benjy is an idiot, and all that is left to him is sensory and emotional response, perception without intellection, and a capacity for the raw intensities of pleasure and pain. He is humanity at its most elemental and most archaic, the zero degree of consciousness. His quasi-tropistic reactions to the conditions he meets are in fact all he *is*” (71). Benjy’s mental disability, then, immediately causes and excuses the selective and jarring nature of his narrative.

Benjy’s narrative is jarring in part because his thoughts move between memories and the present with seemingly little or no warning or organization. There is critical consensus that Benjy moves into his memories, either deliberately or not, because they are moments more comforting or pivotal than his present environment can afford; as Paul M. Hedeem summarizes in “A Symbolic Center in a Conceptual Country: A Gassian Rubric for *The Sound and the Fury*” (1985), “Faulkner creates a poetry that slips from one image into another and another, and the past is relived again and again as those few poor moments of satiety, of Caddy, are asserted and reasserted” (630). The loss Benjy

experiences is thus significant on many levels, both to himself and to the structure of his narrative. Bleikasten speaks of Benjy's memories of Caddy, noting that,

Benjy's moaning points at once to an absence, an absence which the perception of anything however remotely related to his lost sister instantly quickens and thickens in his vacant mind. To Benjy, Caddy is the nearest of absences. His memory has no memories. He cannot remember, he cannot forget. For him it is as though Caddy had only departed a few seconds ago: her trace is forever fresh, and the merest sensation ... recalls her presence with agonizing immediacy. (58-59)

Benjy then is both a character who experiences specific losses, and a way to explore loss generally.

This tenuous position as character/symbol becomes problematic when Benjy's status as a disabled character is considered. If Benjy is a character, how can his loss be conflated to mean loss in general, and if he is a symbol, how does that speak to the reality of persons with mental disabilities? Maria Truchan-Tataryn finds the credibility of Benjy's depiction as mentally disabled to be particularly troubling. Truchan-Tataryn asserts that, "Despite the growth of a global disability rights movement and the development of the discipline of disability studies in the humanities, the figure of Benjy's mindless, voiceless subhumanity continues to resonate through Faulknerian scholarship as a believable portrait of disability" (160). The greatest danger surrounding Benjy, then, is what he, as a representation of disability, is capable of doing to the definition of disability within society. Truchan-Tataryn's greatest critique is that,

For critics, Faulkner's rendering of human blankness has typified individuals medically labeled as idiots. Benjy, however, more accurately illuminates not the (lack of) subjectivity of a cognitively impaired individual in lived experience but rather imaginings projected upon a

population denied agency and voice by authors of public policy as well as narrative texts. (163)

Although Truchan-Tataryn's concern is closely allied with my own, it is misdirected. She observes that critical analyses of Benjy as a realistic depiction of mental disability "fail to challenge the erroneous association of intellectual disability with a mental, emotional and social emptiness" (167). While this is undoubtedly true, it accepts that Benjy is, in fact, characterized as empty. Truchan-Tataryn's argument should not be aimed at Benjy's depiction in the novel, but rather at the body of criticism that has unquestionably accepted the interpretation of Benjy as mindless.

While decades of scholarly exploration have added layer upon layer of interpretation to Benjy's narrative, something essential to his experience has been overlooked. While the critics who, like Hedeem, mine Benjy's mental/temporal fluctuations to unearth fascinating insight into the ways in which Benjy creates comfort for himself, they do not then connect these insights to what it means that Benjy can and does actively comfort himself. Such critics overlook Benjy as a character and focus instead on the text attributed to him; Truchan-Tataryn goes beyond Benjy to focus on what interpretations of his characterization do to larger social views of disability. What these critics hold in common is their conviction that Benjy is mindless, and while most critics accept this and instead explore how mindlessness is achieved on a literary level, I reject the interpretation of Benjy as mindless and empty. Rather, Benjy does not do damage to stereotypes of disability because he is not mindless, nor is he depicted in such a way. It is the decades of unified criticism (and Faulkner's own problematic

commentary) that have cemented such an interpretation. The novel itself both raises the question of Benjy's emptiness and shows that although he is extremely limited, he is in no way empty.

All this is to say that critics make assumptions about Benjy's capabilities and cognitive capacities because of his social status as "idiot," and yet the text insists Benjy is more aware than those around him perceive him to be. As Ted Roggenbuck observes in "'The way he looked said Hush': Benjy's Mental Atrophy in *The Sound and the Fury*" (2005), "From the time of its original publication to the present, too many readers of Benjy's narrative have simply accepted this assumption [of Benjy's mindlessness] and as a consequence have oversimplified Benjy as a character" (590). Roggenbuck makes a persuasive and informed case against Benjy's perceived mindlessness and/or emptiness, arguing that although Benjy's intellect does not progress past childhood, "his mental state changes significantly through the course of his life" (581). In essence, "As a child Benjy demonstrates greater intellectual ability than most critics give him credit for, but by 1928 he has so withdrawn both mentally and emotionally from the world and people around him that he no longer possesses enough emotional investment in it to attempt to interpret much of what transpires" (Roggenbuck 581).

Roggenbuck sees Benjy's cries as proof of a greater cognition than he is traditionally granted. The scene where Benjy burns his hand is often cited as an example of Benjy's limited, if not absent, ability to understand his surroundings: "I put my hand out to where the fire had been. 'Catch him.' Dilsey said. 'Catch him back.' My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me.... She took my hand out of

my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud” (59). Because Benjy does not say that his hand is burned or that it hurts, but rather reports that his hand goes to his mouth and his voice is loud, many critics take this to mean that he does not understand cause and effect, or even the concept of pain. Roggenbuck reclaims this scene, however, by observing Benjy’s “detachment says more about his diminished interest in his current existence than it does about the limits of his cognitive abilities” (582). Benjy thus relays so much of his past not because he cannot locate himself in time, but because that is where his interest is. In his childhood Caddy attempts to communicate with Benjy, and since she is absent in 1928, “when those around him concern themselves more with suppressing his crying than with trying to understand it, when trying to communicate becomes mostly pointless because nobody will pay enough attention to understand him, Benjy’s interest in his own voice and the voices of those around him deadens” (Roggenbuck 583).

Roggenbuck further rejects Benjy’s blankness by noting that “in two rare moments of directly expressing preference Benjy reports, ‘I liked to smell Versh’s house,’ and ‘*Dilsey finished putting me to bed. The bed smelled like T.P. I liked it*’ (28, 29) ... Many discussions of Benjy deny that he can express preference” (591, original italics). Benjy is not mindless or empty at all; he not only knows what he wants, but knows what he likes and what he does not. Benjy may be limited, but he very much exhibits mental and emotional awareness.

The seemingly endless number of critical interpretations of Benjy’s narrative speaks to the richness of experience and communication found therein. Many critics use

Benjy's memories against him, claiming both the disordered nature and simplistic representation of these memories reveal his inability to relate to or invest in his world due to his mental disability. Paul M. Hedeon echoes the critical commonplace that Benjy's "innocent (uninterpreting) egoism and his absolute objectivity ... make his past experiences different from those rendered in traditional fictions" (630), and asserts that Benjy's memories "contain events that Benjy has either witnessed or participated in. All are vividly called forth and innocently rendered; all are uninterpreted and unchanged. In essence, all are narratively leveled by the muted voice of Benjy's idiocy" (629). Such an objective narrative would accomplish what Leon Howard, in "The Composition of *The Sound and the Fury*" (1981), identifies as "experimental writing ... in which the author achieves discipline by adopting the point of view of a character more simplistic than the story he tells" (114). If Benjy is unable to interpret or otherwise engage with his memories, he would indeed serve as an authorial experiment in storytelling rather than existing as a complex character.

Although this claim of objectivity is commonplace in critical investigations of *The Sound and the Fury*, it contradicts another accepted interpretation of the novel; as Marjorie Pryse observes, there is "a kind of motivation or intention in Benjy ... although Benjy does not possess self-awareness, his movements into the most distant past illustrate both the comfort and the source of original trauma that he derives from his earliest memories" (44). Benjy's memories are selective and specific; Benjy does not display random memories of commonplace or everyday events, but rather shows interest in and derives comfort from specific times, events, and people. Stacy Burton notes in "Benjy,

Narrativity, and the Coherence of Compson History” (1995) that Benjy “is a character struggling to order and express his experience of the world. Both what he remembers and what he notices reveal what matters to him: his discourse, hardly objective, strongly evidences his consciousness” (215). Burton further rejects Benjy as empty or reiterative: “Unable to order his entire section chronologically, Benjy nonetheless patterns it according to his central concerns: virtually *every* remembered episode consists of others’ conversations about him or of incidents in which his sister Caddy plays a prominent role,” and argues that “Benjy desires to shape time, to find order in or for experiences whose transience he does not understand” (216). Benjy’s memories, then, do not comfort him because he is unable to interpret his experiences, but rather because “he does now know that they represent what can never be again” (Burton 213).

Benjy’s continual return to his memories often leads critics to claim that Benjy doesn’t know the difference between past and present; Pryse comments that “Benjy is not conscious of living in the present moment unless someone else (usually Luster) speaks to him” (35). This seems an exaggerated conclusion. Benjy is surely conscious of the present, although he allows his attention to wander, which is evident in the reports of Benjy’s cries. When Benjy bellows or moans Luster usually reprimands him, thus bringing his attention back to the present. If Benjy does not know the difference between past and present, he should theoretically only cry in the present if he is also crying in the memory he is reliving; for example, Benjy remembers being held by Caddy as she tells him, “You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You’ve got your Caddy. Haven’t you got your Caddy” (9). He is not crying in this memory – if anything, it is a happy memory

– yet he is immediately recalled to the present with “*Can ’t you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. Aint you shamed of yourself, making all this racket*” (9). It is clear that Benjy is crying because he is remembering a moment of intense affection for and from Caddy and he is able to compare this with her present absence. Benjy cries because he knows that this particular moment is gone, and that Caddy has not yet returned, although he does not understand that she will never return. As Hedeem states, “the genuine comfort of the past – being held by Caddy – is with obvious and powerful understatement contrasted with the much poorer comfort of the present” (630). Benjy cries precisely because he *can* distinguish temporal difference. To say that Benjy cannot discern the difference between past and present is to overlook entirely his cries, which serve as his main form of communication.

Benjy’s cries also reveal a more complex interiority when he sees Miss Quentin in the swing (48). He simultaneously remembers finding Caddy in the swing, and he momentarily mistakes Miss Quentin on some level for Caddy. The association reminds him of both the original scene where Caddy is in the swing and of the fact that it is *not* Caddy there now – Caddy is gone. Benjy begins to cry not because he thinks Miss Quentin is Caddy, but because he knows she is not, and he misses his sister. Hedeem claims that, “Because Benjy prevents identification and association by not interpreting and creating, we are frustrated in our attempts to interpret and create” (630), and yet Benjy does both: as children, Caddy tells Quentin that she will run away. Benjy hears her, understands her words, interprets their meaning and connects this to her threatened absence: “‘I’ll run away and never come back.’ Caddy said. I began to cry.... ‘Hush

now.’ She said. ‘I’m not going to run away.’ So I hushed. Caddy smelled like trees in the rain” (19). Benjy cries not only because he understands what Caddy is saying, but also out of protest. He also calms down when she promises him she is not leaving. Just because this is the only reported case of Benjy’s ability to interpret and envision the future, it is not a fluke or coincidence. Benjy possesses greater intellectual ability than most critics credit him with.

Benjy is also able to interpret the situation around him when Caddy’s burgeoning sexuality begins to change her, and her guilt separates her from Benjy: “Caddy came to the door and stood there, looking at Father and Mother. Her eyes flew at me, and away. I began to cry. It went loud and I got up. Caddy came in and stood with her back to the wall, looking at me. I went toward her, crying, and she shrank against the wall and I saw her eyes and I cried louder and pulled at her dress. Her eyes ran” (68-69). Here, Benjy responds to Caddy’s demeanor rather than her words. Bleikasten interprets Benjy’s love for Caddy as “absolute only in its need and demand ... Benjy does not love Caddy so much as Caddy’s love and in his fierce narcissism he would like this love to be given to nobody else” (78). This distorts Benjy’s emotional needs in an unjustified way. Benjy’s comfort relies on a routine, order, and stability that Vickery interprets as “an inflexible pattern which he defends against novelty or change with every bellow of his overgrown body” (35). What disturbs Benjy is not Caddy paying attention to or giving love to someone else, but rather that by becoming sexually active and harboring the socially orchestrated shame that accompanies her state, she essentially becomes someone else to Benjy. Caddy cannot maintain eye contact with Benjy, so he knows she is not herself.

Benjy demonstrates remarkable agency in this scene by pushing Caddy toward the bathroom, as if she can wash away her sexuality and guilt as she washed away her perfume (42). Although Benjy does not understand the nature of Caddy's emotional distancing from him, he knows something is wrong and responds in a way that has been successful in the past. Benjy may be unable to discern Caddy's guilt or her need for privacy, but he certainly has agency and knows what he wants when he pushes her toward the bathroom. Even if Benjy cannot produce a sufficient solution, he has correctly interpreted a complex situation.

If Benjy were only misunderstood or toyed with by those around him, his life experiences would not contain the agonizing tragedy that marks them. It is both the immense nature and staggering volume of Benjy's loss which builds to create true sympathy for Benjy. Caddy is, of course, Benjy's greatest source of loss. Burton argues that this is because she is the greatest source of communication for Benjy: "Only Caddy speaks, listens, and responds to Benjy as though he has the capability to engage in verbal dialogue; she alone involves herself with him in a way that suggests his discourse and history matter" (219). Burton also suggests that Benjy remembers Caddy so frequently because, "while everyone else reads him on their own narrow terms, Caddy alone engages him dialogically ... because Caddy alone persistently offers her brother the hope of speech, her absence signals for Benjy the lost possibility of genuine dialogue" (218). Caddy is the only person around him to even try to elicit speech from Benjy, to try to generate complex meaning from his cries. She is the only person to both try to develop his mind while simultaneously accepting it for what it is.

In tandem with Caddy's efforts to communicate with Benjy is her affection for him, demonstrating that he is indeed a person of value. While everyone else around him is concerned with quieting him and finding something to occupy his attention, she alone tries to capture his attention and engage it. While others maintain the order Benjy appreciates so that he will stay quiet, Caddy is instead concerned for his happiness. Vickery notes, "Caddy both realizes and respects his fear of change ... Even when she has accepted the inevitability of change for herself and is preparing to marry Herbert, she tries to bind Quentin to a promise of seeing that Benjy's life is not further disordered by his being committed to a mental institution" (36). Quentin is disinterested at best in Benjy's future, and Jason simply waits for his chance to send his brother to the institution at Jackson. Caddy alone understands Benjy's particular needs and satisfies them for the sake of his peace, rather than her own.

Dilsey also signals loss for Benjy, but in a very different way than Caddy does. Burton claims, "Dilsey and Luster interact with Benjy, but treat him as a child.... Dilsey usually views him as a mute three-year-old, though does so very maternally" (219). Dilsey does not try to teach Benjy as Caddy does, to be sure, but neither does she view him as an embarrassment (as Jason does), a nuisance (as Luster does), or a mysterious punishment (as Mrs. Compson does). Dilsey is rather the current and only affectionate figure in Benjy's life, tending to his needs and keeping him calm, even if that is the extent of their interaction. It would seem as if he is just one item on her long, long list of things to accomplish around the Compson household if not for their trip to her church on Easter, as described in the final section. To be sure, her entire family attends the service

so there is no one at the Compson house to watch over Benjy (except, ironically, his own family), so Benjy must logically accompany her, but she neither asks Luster to watch Benjy during the service nor resents his presence. They share an affectionate bond that cannot compare to the bond Benjy has/had with Caddy, but it is made obvious that it is the only affectionate bond Benjy currently has.

Thus Dilsey emphasizes not only Benjy's staggering loss but also his isolation. She consistently defends Benjy in his socially marginalized status, most frequently to her own family. Roskus claims the Compson family is unlucky and that Benjy is "the sign of it laying right there on that bed. Aint the sign of it been here for folks to see fifteen years now," to which Dilsey replies, "Spose it is ... It aint hurt none of you and your, is it" (29). Similarly, when Frony tells Dilsey not to let Benjy and Luster share a bed because "That boy conjure him," Dilsey once more acts as the voice of reason, replying, "Hush your mouth ... Aint you got no better sense than that" (32). Dilsey must likewise defend Benjy's humanity against the larger community when they attend Easter services at her church. Frony tells her mother that she shouldn't bring Benjy to church because people talk, to which Dilsey replies, "And I knows whut kind of folks ... Trash white folks. Dat's who it is. Thinks he aint good enough fer white church, but nigger church aint good enough for him ... Tell um de good Lawd dont keer whether he bright er not. Dont nobody but white trash keer dat" (290). Dilsey reliably defends Benjy, but just as her affection emphasizes that she is the only one to show him any, so her protection shows that she is the only one who is not judging him in a society full of people who are.

The final example of Benjy's loss is so extreme that its employment must surely be, on some level, to secure sympathy for Benjy: his castration. Most critics view this moment as Benjy's first (and last) sexual act, the inevitable moment when Benjy's biological development outpaces his cognitive development and chaos ensues. Jacqui Griffiths, in "Almost Human: Indeterminate Children and Dogs in 'Flush' and *The Sound and the Fury*" (2002), asserts that, "Castration is an attempt to contain Benjy by securing him in a notion of pre-pubescent innocence" while it simultaneously "dehumanizes him" (171). Griffiths further argues that Benjy's castration "emphasizes the menace that Benjy's sexuality presents ... the discomfort associated with a creature that everybody insists is a child, in its dog-like caste position, but which shows evidence of 'adult' sexuality and an unrestrained animality" (171). Thus Benjy is castrated as a way to rid him of his potentially uninhibited sexuality and reunite his physical development with his mental capacities.

Bleikasten views Benjy's attempts to communicate with the schoolgirls, the incident which ends in Benjy's castration, as incestuous: "It is surely no accident that the scene of Benjy's unique attempt at sexual intercourse occurs at the very place where he used to meet Caddy when she too came back from school. Benjy once again confuses past and present, mistaking today's girl with yesterday's Caddy," and concludes that "the following castration then also assumes a new symbolic significance in that it becomes the inescapable punishment for the violation of the primal taboo" (*Failure* 79). Bleikasten goes on to compare this scene to the one in which Quentin is accused of sexual misconduct with the little girl that follows him on the day of his suicide in Boston.

However, as Bleikasten also notes, nothing in Benjy's narrative "suggests a sexual assault. Yet it is as such that Benjy's behavior is construed by the girls and by the adults who are told about the incident. And Faulkner's comments leave no doubt either as to the sexual character of the attempted 'communication'" (*Failure* 83). I am less concerned with Faulkner's comments and more concerned with Benjy's; he repeatedly insists he is trying to "say," the specificity of which must surely indicate its accuracy. If he were trying to act, it does not make sense that he would report that he was trying "to say." Rather than assume this is example of Benjy's inability to utilize language, taking his statement to be accurate layers the scene with ominous meaning. If Benjy was not attempting to attack the girl, but rather trying to communicate with her as some sort of possible avatar for Caddy, then the decision to castrate him is not only an enormous overreaction, but a gross injustice. As he is victimized by not being able to verbally defend or explain himself, here he is punished, physically and permanently, because he cannot explain his intentions.

Bleikasten connects Quentin's misunderstanding to this scene, but it is an appropriate connection for reasons Bleikasten surely did not anticipate. It is not only the pattern of incest that unites these moments, but also the pattern of misinterpretation. It is obvious that Quentin has no sexual designs on the child who follows him on the day of his suicide, yet her brother Julio assumes that is his intention, and even the lawmen that take Quentin in are ready to entertain such a possibility. It is only after Quentin's friends, who know his personality and thus can extrapolate his intentions, arrive to defend him that Quentin is cleared (141-145). Benjy has no such people to vouch for his intentions

or even his interiority, so when his sexual inclinations are assumed, there is nothing to counter such a conclusion. Quentin is freed because he (or others on his behalf) can verbally explain himself, while Benjy is punished because he lacks that ability.

Benjy's cries are a textual indicator that he is trying to communicate, but there are also moments when Benjy actively *reports* that he is trying to do something. The fact that Benjy not only tries to do something, but also reports that he tries to do something, does not just suggest that he possesses cognitive and emotional agency – it proves it. Benjy's memories of the incidents leading to his castration are the most desperate example of his attempts to communicate: “[The gate] was open when I touched it, and I held to it in the twilight. I wasn't crying, and I tried to stop, watching the girls coming along in the twilight ... I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out” (52-53). Roggenbuck observes that Benjy “tries to say and tries to cry and can do neither” (583) and responds to other critical interpretations of Benjy's limited cognition in this scene by insisting that “For Benjy to say eight times in the span of a few sentences that he tries to accomplish something suggests that he possesses more than a dim sense of purpose, or a partial sense of his plight” (Roggenbuck 584). Indeed, the repetition of “trying” comes to a feverish crescendo, where Benjy tries to order his retelling but seems to get caught up once more in the confused frenzy of the moment. Benjy recounts that he tries but in the very act of recounting, he is also intensely trying to communicate. Benjy is desperately trying to communicate the fact that he was, in that moment, trying to both communicate and act.

Benjy could not have known that this incident would end with his castration, but he knows something bad is happening to him and he is trying to get away from it. He is interpreting his situation and, just like when Caddy threatens to leave or refuses to look at him, he tries to act accordingly.

While this scene is life-changing for Benjy, it is not just the gravity of the situation that prompts him to *try* to do something. In a less monumental scene, Luster removes flowers from Benjy's "graveyard" and Benjy tries to get them back: "Luster knocked the flowers over with his hand. 'That's what they'll do to you at Jackson when you starts bellerin.' I tried to pick up the flowers. Luster picked them up, and they went away. I began to cry" (54-55). This is important because it shows that Benjy's trying is not limited to moments of self-preservation. Benjy could, perhaps, try as desperately as he does with the schoolgirl because the moment becomes one of self-defense, in which case his tries could be viewed as an isolated instance of instinct. The fact that he tries to regain his flowers from Luster, however, shows that when he tries to do something, it is an intentional act.

Whether Benjy's actions outside his yard are sexually motivated or not (his narrative discounts such a motivation but does not unequivocally refute it), the fact remains that his punishment is the removal of his testicles. Whether he is a threat in his sexuality or simply because he cannot express himself in a traditional way, the reaction is severe. Throughout his narrative he constantly asserts his humanity, and to be treated in such an inhumane way calls attention to his devalued place within his family and the larger community. This is reasserted when Benjy cries when he sees himself in the

mirror, surely a response to not only his missing body parts, but also his complete lack of involvement in the decision (73). The severity of the punishment is also indicated when Jason grossly asserts that Caddy and Miss Quentin should be castrated as well (253, 263). Such a statement reinforces the inhumane nature of such a punishment because Caddy and Miss Quentin are never viewed as inhuman in the novel. As their humanity is never questioned, it is absurd that they should be subjected to such a procedure, and so it should also be absurd to subject Benjy to it; yet, it happens.

Thus Benjy is often viewed as the victim in the novel. As Bleikasten remarks, “even though Benjy is in many ways at one with his environment, his relationship with it is by no means symbiotic; and since, on the other hand, his condition prevents him from ever gaining any hold on it, he is bound to be the plaything of circumstance. Benjy is the quintessential victim, nakedly exposed to whatever blow fate or chance aims at him” (*Failure* 72). Benjy is also victimized when those around him are unable to interpret his needs; Mrs. Compson in particular refuses to understand Benjy’s cries. Burton notes,

Caroline Compson ... is notoriously unwilling to consider the possibility of communicating with her son; to her he is an embarrassing object – at best a “poor baby,” at worst a punishment she’s certain she didn’t deserve (9). Her engagement with him, both as he recalls it and as other narrators tell it, is strictly authoritative and monologic in intention ... She rejects any attempts to understand Benjy: when Caddy tells her why he cries and how to quiet him, Caroline accuses her of “humor[ing] him too much”; and when T.P. explains that Benjy wants to go to the gate because he thinks Caddy will return, she responds, “Nonsense” (72, 59). (218, original references)

Although Mrs. Compson is arguably a poor mother to all her children, she essentially refuses to connect with Benjy at all. This becomes more tragic considering Benjy’s

needs are fairly straightforward. Most people around him, which by 1928 are more Dilsey's family than his own, know how to interpret Benjy's cries and are able to satisfy him at least to the extent that he stops crying. Cheryl Lester, in "From Place to Place in *The Sound and the Fury*: The Syntax of Interrogation" (1988), notes that, "Through his cries, Luster understands that Benjy wants to see the golfers, the flowers, or the fire; Dilsey understands that Benjy smells death; Quentin understands that Benjy doesn't want Caddy to leave; Caddy understands that Benjy thinks it is Christmas, that he wants to hold a letter, that he doesn't like the smell of perfume, and so on" (152). Some of Benjy's companions also understand *why* it is he wants what he wants, as in T.P.'s astute observation that Benjy not only wants to go to the gate, but that he wants to go *because* he thinks Caddy will be there (51). Therefore Benjy's mental disability does not limit him as much as a lack of understanding from those around him does, and his victimization is largely created by his family's increasing disinterest.

Benjy's victimization is only fully understood when the final section of the novel is considered. The final section is essential to understanding Benjy's plight because it is here that the social voice, rather than the internal voice, comes into play. This social narrator is not to be mistaken with an authorial narrator; as Burton warns, "Despite significant differences in perspective, the fourth narrator, like the others, tells the Compson story quite selectively and is neither omniscient nor objective" (222). The fourth narrator depicts Benjy's physical being, rather than his interior self, as

a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead looking and hairless; dropsical too, he

moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear. His hair was pale and fine. It had been brushed smoothly down upon his brow like that of children in daguerreotypes. His eyes were clear, of the pale sweet blue of cornflowers, his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little. (274)

Critical reception is often one of shock; Bleikasten introduces Benjy as “the idiot, and no reader will fail to recognize him in this lumpish, slobbering giant. His lack of motor coordination recalls his mental debility, his hairless skin and fat body indicate his castrated condition, and his cornflower-blue eyes are reminders of the childish innocence buried within this ungainly mass of adult flesh” (*Melancholy* 127). Cecil is similarly put off by “the grossness of Faulkner’s thumbnail portrait in Section IV, the first objective view a reader gets of Benjy” (35). The problem with this statement is the problem with any interpretation that assumes this narrator is objective – it is not. It is a reflection, a culmination, of social views. If Jefferson itself had a voice, this would be it. It is imperative that Benjy be described in an insensitive way because this reveals the insensitive way in which Benjy’s society views him. The complex image the reader forms of Benjy in no way relates to the simplistic and “gross” depiction of him in the last section, and this calls attention to a paradox within the text: Benjy’s depiction here does not capture the interiority displayed in the first section, and the failure is obvious. Such a failure indicates the narrative is socially derived and emphasizes that society views Benjy in limited, constrained terms.

The description of Benjy’s eyes as blue (which was unknown information until the final section) is a narrative attempt to regain some of Benjy’s original self. It is inadequate in that it reduces Benjy’s inner self to clear, blue eyes. The comment that

Benjy watches Dilsey with a “sweet vague gaze” (275) both helps and hurts Benjy. It supports the view of him as mindless – if there is nothing going on inside his head (thus his empty eyes) this would be reflected as vague and sweet. It also, however, serves to recapture some of the original sympathy Benjy’s narrative evokes. The physical depiction of Benjy causes some revulsion in the reader, but the sympathy one feels for Benjy directs that revulsion at the narrator for describing him in such ways, rather than at Benjy himself. Benjy’s narrative proves that there is no meanness, no darkness in him and it is a failure on the narrator’s part for perceiving this only in his sweet blue eyes.

Benjy’s goodness is contrasted with Jason’s cruelty, a depiction which does not change even though the narrative has stepped outside Jason’s inner self. Dilsey’s comment that “de good Lawd don’t keer whether [Benjy is] bright or not” (290) becomes rather ominous when set against the backdrop of Jason’s current rule of the Compson household. The final section continues to follow Jason in his sadistic pursuit of Miss Quentin, and his day filled with rage and disappointment surely fuels his actions at the closing scene of the novel. When Luster takes Benjy to the cemetery in the buggy but takes a wrong turn, Benjy’s ordered life explodes: “For an instant Ben sat in an utter hiatus. Then he bellowed. Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath. There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless” (320). Jason jumps onto the buggy, corrects their direction, strikes Benjy for crying, and sends them on their way. The restoration of order has calmed Benjy, who sits as if the previous scene never happened save that his flower has been broken by Jason’s hand: “The broken flower drooped over Ben’s fist and his eyes were empty and blue and

serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place” (321). There is much to be discerned from this scene; Jason exhibits characteristic brutality when he strikes Luster for driving the wrong direction and hits Benjy for crying, but it is driven home that his rage cannot touch Benjy. Benjy’s inner self is so much stronger than Jason’s wrath that even Benjy’s broken flower cannot break the serenity that he finds in restored order. If Jason’s power lies in psychological warfare, then Benjy can never be Jason’s victim. Such a reading deflates Jason and devalues his fury while potentially empowering Benjy. The status quo that represents decay for the rest of the family is in fact the very thing that gives Benjy strength. If he can keep his routines, he has the power to solace himself the way none of his family is able to.

This dependence on order comes under attack when Jason threatens to send Benjy to the institution at Jackson. Jason assumes Benjy will “be happier there, with people like him,” (221) and that “if they’d just sent him on to Jackson while he was under the ether, he’d never have known the difference” (263). What Jason’s assertions really rest on, however, is his shame in his brother. He admits that

it dont take much pride to not like to see a thirty year old man playing around the yard with a nigger boy, running up and down the fence and lowing like a cow whenever they play golf over there. I says if they’d sent him to Jackson at first we’d all be better off today. I says, you’ve done your duty by him; you’ve done all anybody can expect of you and more than most folks would do, so why not send him there and get that much benefit out of the taxes we pay. (222)

Benjy’s dependence on the physical reminders of Caddy around the house, such as her slipper, the yard, the spot on the wall where the mirror used to be, build a strong case

against Benjy's happiness at Jackson. As Caddy predicts, his world would be upended and the order he so heavily relies on would be unattainable. Within the context of the novel, it does not matter if Benjy is actually sent to Jackson or not – it is understood that such a fate would devastate him. This ultimately underscores the problematic relationship between Benjy and his inability to communicate with the rest of society – his needs are simple and finite and indeed it takes less effort to comfort him than to contain him. But to the community outside his gate that sees him as a drooling lump who neither belongs in Dilsey's church nor the white church, all Benjy's "trying to say" becomes meaningless. To an insensitive and unconcerned world, the emotional and beautiful processes that make up Benjy's interiority become nothing – just sound and fury.

Benjy's narrative contains all the evidence that his mental, emotional and social self is in no way absent or lost. Yet L. Moffitt Cecil's interpretation of Benjy as a "blithering idiot" (34) or Bleikasten's description of Benjy as a "lumpish, slobbering giant" (*Melancholy* 127) crassly, but reliably, echoes most critical interpretations of Benjy's persona. This seems an intensely insensitive reaction to him not only in light of recent disability movements, but primarily within the context of the novel itself. The narrative goes to great (and I believe successful) lengths to create a genuine sympathy for Benjy. As Roggenbuck summarizes, "Like his brother Quentin, Benjy's life wears at him and he withdraws. Unlike Quentin, he withdraws into his mind, to better versions of his life than his bleak present. He has many good reasons for doing so. In the course of his life to age thirty-three he has lost his two closest siblings, his father, important pieces of his territory, and his testicles" (592). Generally, critics pick up on this sympathy to some

degree, usually in relation to Benjy's emotionally unavailable family. Jeffrey J. Folks, in "Crowd and Self: William Faulkner's Sources of Agency in *The Sound and the Fury*" (2002), notes that Benjy "reflects Faulkner's sense of disempowerment" and holds the position of scapegoat within the household: "His identification in that role by Dilsey Gibson and even by those who may not yet admit it, such as Mrs. Compson, suggests that he is indispensable to the continuation of the family's order of command" (36). With the position of scapegoat comes a sense of injustice, where Benjy comes to be the scapegoat not because he is guilty of anything but simply through his inability to fight such a position.

Even Cecil acknowledges the narrative's intended sympathy: "Having become convinced of [Benjy's] innocence, his helplessness, his pitifulness, a reader becomes justly indignant at Jason's contemptuous reference to Benjy as the 'Great American Gelding'" (35). Vickery combines Benjy's and Caddy's plights and concludes, "Benjy and Caddy are tests of the family's humanity, he simply because he is not fully human ... Benjy's behavior is a constant trial to the family and to this extent counterpoints Caddy's long disgracing act. Both challenge the family's capacity for understanding and forgiveness and the family fails both" (48). If critics have been quick to judge Benjy, Benjy's family has paved the way.

The Hamlet

Benjy's depiction is significant because Faulkner envisions the interiority of a person with mental disabilities and lends him voice. Ike Snopes, in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* (1940), is not granted the same kind of interior voice but is perhaps Faulkner's

most remarkable character with mental disabilities because he is granted a brief and powerful journey of independence. Ike's depiction is the greatest example of any character examined here of the split between narrative representation and familial/communal perception. *The Hamlet* revolves around the people of Frenchman's Bend and the convoluted schemes that shape their lives. Ratliff, the travelling salesman, journeys to and from Frenchman's Bend and much of the narrative follows his observations. The Snopes family arrives in the hamlet shrouded in mystery and rumor, and Flem Snopes uses this fear to climb the social ladder and start taking control of local commerce from the reigning Varner family and despotically granting his continually arriving kin positions of power in local businesses. This sets the stage for various narrative twists and turns; when Varner's youngest daughter Eula, the town beauty, is pregnant and unwed, Flem marries her to secure his position of power and dominance over the Varner family; when Mink Snopes kills Jack Houston in a fit of outrage and tries to run, his cousin assists in his capture because he is convinced Mink has money taken from Houston's body and wants it for himself; Flem brings in an unknown horse trader to fool the people into buying wild and unbreakable ponies who inevitably escape after the money has been collected, and Flem surreptitiously profits off the people's miscalculations.

The novel is largely comprised of independent vignettes, woven together with themes of lust for money and the destruction of the lives that become tangled in such webs. Margaret M. Dunn observes in "The Illusion of Freedom in *The Hamlet* and *Go Down, Moses*" (1985) that "Greed is a major motif in this contrapuntal exploration"

(409). Such greed sits at the very heart of the hamlet; the decaying mansion that gives the hamlet its name references the Frenchman, an original settler in the area who sought to tame the land and even reroute the river through the work of his horde of slaves in order to build his palatial dwelling. The decaying mansion also speaks to the hamlet's identity:

He was gone now, the foreigner, the Frenchman, with his family and his slaves and his magnificence. His dream, his broad acres were parceled out now into small shiftless mortgaged farms for the directors of Jefferson banks to squabble over before selling finally to Will Varner, and all that remained of him was ... the skeleton of the tremendous house which his heirs-at-large had been pulling down and chopping up ... for thirty years now for firewood. (4)

The mansion was borne of greed and now the locals treat the old building as they treat one another, tearing it down piece by piece for their own benefit.

Ike is both part of and separate from the community around him, and his family dynamics are complex. The Snopes clan is a mixed lot, almost none of whom are educated or even particularly intelligent. When Flem Snopes opens the doors of Frenchman's Bend to his family at large, Ike is one of the many Snopes who arrive steadily and unceremoniously, and though he has no immediate family with him, his cousin Flem is his guardian. Ike is claimed by all his family in that they accept him as their own and make no excuses for him to the rest of the community. They do not hide him away or appear hostile toward him. This, however, is the extent of familial hospitality. The Snopes clan embraces Ike as a Snopes, but no one in the family invites him in to truly belong, so Ike instead stays with Mrs. Littlejohn, who tends to him more than any of his kin do. Ike has a small inheritance for which he is passed between family

members, and though Flem is his guardian, it is Ratliff who feels inclined to pass Mrs. Littlejohn some money on Ike's behalf. Mrs. Littlejohn takes Ike in and guides him, and although she is not family, she shows Ike the most compassion and patience.

Ike's story can be summed up fairly easily: Ike is a mentally disabled character who falls in love with a cow, and is forced to eat the cow when his kin discover his romance and are shamed by it. But beneath the bare plot are complex layers begging to be explored. Ike's narrative is essential to the novel because Ike both represents what those around him lack (love, freedom, and disinterest in money) and his narrative emphasizes that his kin are poorer for not sharing these traits. Ike's story is filled with romantic imagery, an embracement of nature, and hope for personal fulfillment that is not shaped by money and these aspects are wholly opposite to the rest of the plotlines in the novel.

Ike's story stands out as a moment when the monetary schemes that so absorb his family and community are rendered unimportant and impotent because money changes hands several times in Ike's story, yet never holds value to him. This is most obvious when Houston tries to give Ike money for rescuing his cow from a barn fire, but Ike is only momentarily interested in the coin as an object before it "rang dully once on the dusty planks and perhaps glinted once, then vanished, though who to know what motion, infinitesimal and convulsive, of supreme repudiation there might have been" (196). Ike briefly attempts to find the coin, though "watching him you would have said he did not want to find the coin. And then you would have said, known, that he did not intend to find it" (197). Lori Watkins Fulton notes in "He's a Bitch: Gender and Nature in *The*

Hamlet” (2003) that “Ike’s viewpoint, while limited, remains free from the prejudices and preferences that influence Faulkner’s other characters” (450). Ike’s brief encounter with money shows his disinterest in it, and stands in sharp contrast to the many other storylines that center on obtaining money, most notably Ratliff’s foolhardy quest for the fabled Frenchman’s treasure buried at the Old Frenchman’s Place at the end of the novel. Though Ike cannot comprehend the value of money the way other characters can, the cow holds real value for him and exposes how emotionally bankrupt other characters are.

There are two parts to Ike’s story; the narrative recounts the people’s reactions to and actions toward Ike, but it also follows Ike himself and does not filter him or his actions through another’s perspective. Ike’s innocence is secured by the purity of his narrative moment, where no outsider can color Ike or his actions with intolerance or ignorance. Ike’s story is told in a peculiar way, where the reader is first subject to the community’s impression of Ike, then follows Ike on an independent journey, and then returns to Ike through the community’s perspective and leaves him there. This sandwiching is the strongest technique for creating sympathy for Ike, and ideally, interest in him as a character. The community’s view of Ike does not strive for understanding or sensitivity, and largely creates a distance between itself and Ike. Ike’s introduction to the novel speaks volumes:

Then [Ratliff] said, “What’s that?” and the other saw what he was looking at – the figure of a grown man but barefoot and in scant faded overalls which would have been about right for a fourteen-year-old boy, passing in the road below the gallery, dragging behind him on a string a wooden block with two snuff tins attached to its upper side, watching over his shoulder with complete absorption the dust it raised. As he passed the gallery he looked up and Ratliff saw the face too – the pale eyes which

seemed to have no vision in them at all, the open drooling mouth encircled by a light fuzz of golden virgin beard. "Another one of them," Bookwright said, in that harsh short voice. Ratliff watched the creature as it went on – the thick thighs about to burst from the overalls, the mowing head turned backward over its shoulder, watching the dragging block. (90-91)

To the men watching him, Ike is a "that" and a "creature" who is not even described as a man, but rather the figure of a man. His description is pieced together in such a way that he is unrelatable to the men, with his indeterminate age, and eyes and mouth lacking self-possession. As Fulton states, "the novel's men doubly 'other' Ike; before they animalize him, they must first feminize him" (450). Ike is feminized when the men stare at and objectify him, enumerating his physical features and which are described in terms such as "virgin" and "thick thighs." Ike is animalized even more directly when he is described as a "creature" with a "mowing head." The result of this is that Ike is "one of them" because he is both a Snopes and is mentally disabled, and as such cannot be "one of us."

The initial impression the reader receives of Ike as a "creature" (90) evokes a being whose disability encompasses and defines who he is and what he is capable of. The reader, through Ratliff, only perceives Ike's limitations; for example, when Flem introduces Ike to Ratliff at the country store, Ike is incapable of freeing his stuck toy from the leg of a table and the effort of saying his name reduces him to frantic laughing that "had never been laughing, cachinnant, sobbing, already beyond the creature's power to stop it, galloping headlong and dragging breath behind it like something still alive at the galloping heels of a Cossack holiday, the eyes above the round mouth fixed and

sightless” (95). These moments appear to limit Ike’s worth as a character which makes his experience in the woods with the cow both more surprising and more powerful.

While the dynamics between Ike and his family play a large role in Ike’s experience, the most magnificent part of Ike’s story is what happens when he is totally separated from his family and community. Ike’s grand adventure does not rely on anyone’s assistance, and while much of the rest of the Snopes clan tends to melt together, to become one great, confused tangle of Snopes, Ike stands out as truly individual. Ike is the only character in the novel who lives a genuine love story. There are other stories of desire in the novel; the schoolteacher Labove is fixated on Eula, and the narrative uses language of violence and excess to describe his emotions. Labove “was mad. He knew it. There would be times now when he did not even want to make love to her but wanted to hurt her, see blood spring and run, watch that serene face warp to the indelible mark of terror and agony beneath his own” (132). Houston and his late wife are described in different terms that still do not connote romantic love: “It was a feud, a gage, wordless, uncapitulating, between that unflagging will not for love or passion but for the married state, and that furious and as unbending one for solitariness and freedom” (230). The tone of Ike’s imaginings are wholly different, where he envisions the cow “blond among the purpling shadows of the pasture, not fixed amid the suppurant tender green but integer of spring’s concentrated climax, by it crowned, garlanded” (186). Ike loves, and though the object of his affection is a cow, it is a pure love.

Ike’s romance with the cow is both the most innocent and perverted storyline in the novel. Critical views of this romance vary widely; Dunn linearly claims that “Ike

enjoys a brief but idyllic honeymoon alone with [the cow] ... that is merely grotesque” (421). In a different vein, Fulton argues that “Faulkner subtly forces readers to adopt Ike’s viewpoint in this section of *The Hamlet*, and by doing so, he transforms an act of bestiality into something that, while not exactly beautiful, at least becomes understandable. Readers sympathize with Ike’s very real loss and mourn with him as he sits alone in the barn, dejected and deserted” (450). Michael Millgate, in *Writers and Critics: William Faulkner* (1961), offers the most sensitive and intuitive interpretation of Ike’s narrative:

The most important love story in the novel, however, and one which modifies our impression of all the others, is that of the idiot Ike Snopes, whose passion for Houston’s cow is celebrated at considerable length and in rich and elevated prose.... Here Faulkner’s “poeticizing” seems successful, and appropriate. The passage is at once a stylistic *tour de force*, an extremely sensitive piece of natural description, and a deliberate attempt to transform an episode which Frenchman’s Bend regards as a simple case of crude “stock-diddling” into a magical tale of true love. The whole story is an extraordinary one, and highly ambivalent in its effects. Because we can never forget that Ike is an idiot and the cow a cow, the story is in part a comic demonstration of the absurdities of romantic idealism; but the poetic language generates sympathy for Ike and we see in his complete dedication to his beloved an ironic comment on Flem’s complete dedication to himself. (87-89)

Millgate’s interpretation accurately views Ike’s feelings as (the only example of) love, a love which is very real and pure, where even the simple act of drinking water together displays their connectedness: “their own drinking faces break each’s mirroring, each face to its own shattered image wedded and annealed” (202). This is not language of feeling or emotion, but something much more basic and much more powerful. Ike cannot tell the cow he loves her and does not have to; the narrative clearly aligns the two in peace and

unity. L  thar Honnighausen, in “Mythic Sex in Mississippi: Eula and Ike Snopes” (1995), observes that the “grotesque combination of the rarified with the rural, and even with the scatological, corresponds with the equally grotesque fact that the love of the mentally handicapped sodomite is the only ‘true love’ in Frenchman’s Bend” (280). The point of the story is not that Ike is “handicapped,” but that the other love stories aren’t about love at all. Olga Vickery further notes Ike’s empowering love in *The Novels of William Faulkner, A Critical Interpretation* (1964) when she claims that, “No extraneous consideration, practical, ethical, or social, distracts [Ike] from or qualifies his absorption in his love ... he is content simply to love and to serve without demanding love in return. In this Ike is the perfect lover” (176). The narrative voice supports this by engaging in romantic imagery, descriptions of ageless beauty and sacrifice, and does not corrupt this love with judgment or condemnation.

Ike’s journey into the wilderness is both a tale of romance and of the natural world. Nature is not exclusive to Ike’s narrative; the Frenchman hacks his mansion out of the natural world, and the people who follow live upon the land, farming out of a desire for preservation. Travelers and traders journey through the wilderness and Mink hides out there after Houston’s murder, but Ike is the only character to embrace the natural world. When Ike and his cow escape into the woods,

they were in the hills now, among the pines. Although the afternoon wind had fallen, the shaggy crests still made a constant murmuring sound in the high serene air. The trunks and the massy foliage were the harps and strings of afternoon; the barred inconstant shadow of the day’s retrograde flowed steadily over them as they crossed the ridge and descended into shadow, into the azure bowl of evening, the windless well of night; the portcullis of sunset fell behind them. (198)

Ike's nature is bursting with light and sound, the supreme soundtrack to his life-defining experience. This scene exemplifies the play of light and shadow and color that fills the narrative's descriptions of the natural world. Such sensory descriptions call attention to Ike's disability in that he can most readily experience the world through his senses, rather than his cognition, and yet these scenes explode with beauty and poetry and peace and are arguably the most eloquent moments in the novel. Ike cannot speak save his name, yet his silence allows the world around him to shine forth and break the silence with its own poetry that Ike alone seems to notice. Ike is limited to, yet freed by his sensory connection to nature.

It is imperative that the narrative grant such descriptive and powerful language to Ike's journey because he is unable to harness language himself. The narrative shows that although Ike does not command speech save his name, his story is worthy of intricate and eloquent language. The description of Ike and the cow lying down to rest at the close of Ike's section exemplifies this beautifully: "When he reaches her, she has already begun to lie down ... lowering herself in two distinct stages into the spent ebb of evening, nestling back into the nest-form of sleep, the mammalian attar. They lie down together" (206). The image is rich in its intricacy and simplicity, the final sentence uniting them absolutely. Their relationship is allowed to develop in the reader's mind as one of deep attachment and compassion, a remarkable account of Ike's mental growth and resourcefulness. It is only when Ike's story is over, when the narrative returns to Ratliff's perspective that Ike's story is reduced to, in Honnighausen's words, the "embarrassing case of the sodomitic relationship of an idiot with a cow" (276). The novel's layout is

key because there is no part of the narrative devoted to Ike that perverts this relationship. Ike's attempts at intercourse are overshadowed by intensely detailed descriptions of how he is able to care for the cow and himself, and once they retreat into the wild, there is no mention of intercourse at all.

The narrative voice challenges the limiting preconceptions the community places on Ike by infusing his experience with fluid and poetic language unmatched elsewhere in the novel, save Eula's god-like descriptions that link her to an old, natural world. Honnighausen notes that, "In the opening passage of the episode, Faulkner, by carefully orchestrating acoustic and metaphoric effects, has created a nature-setting and a linguistic medium in which realistic features ... and stylizing elements ... are cautiously balanced" and argues the narrative language "suggests the harmony of the human being and the animal as integral parts of nature" (281). The narrative indeed suggests harmony as Ike and the cow wander the forest, heading back to their nest for nightfall: "They walk in splendor. Joined by the golden skein of the wet grass rope, they move in single file toward the ineffable effulgence, directly into the sun. They are still pacing it. They mount the final ridge. They will arrive together. At the same moment all three of them cross the crest and descend into the bowl of evening and are extinguished" (205). Ike, his cow, and the sun are one, travelers in the natural world, moving at the same speed toward night. If this glorious image is satire, then it is wasted poetry.

In much the same way, Honnighausen argues that Ike's story, along with Eula's, should be viewed as "redemptive myths and thematic counterpoints to the stories of sexual anxieties projected into the Labove, Houston, and Mink Snopes plots" (276).

Honnighausen observes that, for Ike, “Faulkner’s principal mode of combining myth and reality is through the grotesque” (280), and astutely notes that, “the Ike Snopes plot, blending elaborate rhetoric with travesty, transmits a mythic love story. But the story ... of the love between a human being and an animal is not told in the acceptable style of the love stories of Zeus as bull or swan ... Instead, Faulkner provokes readers by a diction in which the ‘poetic’ and Thirties’ realism are manneristically forced together” (280). I would argue it is not the style in which Ike’s relationship with the cow is told but rather when it is filtered through the community that it becomes devalued, and thus unacceptable.

The cadences in narrative style throughout the novel play a large part in shaping Ike’s story as a romance rather than a satire. Lance Langdon claims that within the novel, “Animality is no mean station” (42), and yet the community sees it as such. When Ike is perceived through the lens of the rest of the hamlet, he is the creature, the other, the “it.” Ratliff’s first impression of Ike is of a hulking, unfathomable figure who blurs the line between myth and reality (95), and when Houston confronts Ike after the fire, Ike is no longer “he” but is transformed into “the other” (194) and “the idiot” (208). This image of Ike, however, cannot stand up to his moments of independence. When Ike is alone with his cow, he is clever and learns quickly. He halters the cow properly not out of practice but because he has seen it done, and knows her discomfort is due to a full milk bag (198). He allows the cow to eat “almost to the measured ounce exactly half of the original feed” (202) so that there will be enough left over to eat in the evening. He provides water for them from a well he creates; he “cleaned it out and scooped a basin for it, which now at

each return of light stood full and clear” (202). Even Houston notes Ike’s success at independence when he muses “the very virginity of the idiot at hiding had seemed to tap at need an inexhaustible reservoir of cleverness as one who has never before needed courage can seem at need to find it” (210). Although Ike is here “the idiot,” his resourcefulness is compared to courage, and even disparaging labels cannot belittle his actions.

Ike’s actions are more than survival instinct, however, as is seen when he gathers flowers to make a crown for his beloved (203). Moreover, the narrative reveals Ike in new and detailed ways; in describing his eating habits, Ike grazes much as the cow does, “an hour later eating something else, anything else, things which the weary long record of shibboleth and superstition had taught his upright kind to call filth, neither liking nor disliking the taste of any thing ... making but one discrimination: he is herbivorous, even the life he eats is the life of plants” (202). This small fact infuses Ike with a gentleness, an innocence which predates the community around him, where man lives in harmony with nature. It also layers on the tragedy of Ike being forced to eat his cow – he does not eat any animal, yet he is forced to eat the animal he loves.

While with his cow in the woods, Ike “is learning fast ... who has learned success and then precaution and secrecy and how to steal and even providence; who has only lust and greed and bloodthirst and a moral conscience to keep him awake at night, yet to acquire” (202). Ike has learned much, but has not learned the “lust and greed and bloodthirst” his neighbors and kin know only too well. Though this is a list of things Ike does not know, it emphasizes his innocence and elevates his personal character above

most of the community. Ultimately, Ike's story is largely viewed as a commentary on the rest of the novel, yet his story is much more important to the development of Ike's character because it reveals his personality. The community sees him only for his relationship with the cow and decides he has no worth; the narrative, however, gives Ike worth by showing his gentleness, determination and heroism. The many facets that come together to make up Ike's narrative reveal an interiority unacknowledged by his community and the ability to make complex emotional attachments unrivaled by anyone else in the novel. The remarkable aspect of Ike's story is not so much how the story develops the rest of the novel, but rather what his story does to develop Ike as a character.

When Houston reclaims his cow and turns her over to Mrs. Littlejohn to be rid of the commotion she and Ike cause, Ike's independent journey is over and the narrative returns to the community's perspective. He is once again the outsider who provides a source of morbid entertainment to the community; he is like an accident they cannot look away from and feel no shame in gawking at. There are two moments when the community notes Ike. The first occurs before his journey with the cow, when he climbs up the stairs at Mrs. Littlejohn's and cannot navigate his way down and the locals gather to witness the spectacle of Mrs. Littlejohn rescuing him: "faces gathered in the lower hall to watch as the firm, gentle, unrelenting hand, the cold, grim, patient voice, drew him, clinging to the rail and bellowing, step by step downward" (188). It is important to note that Mrs. Littlejohn is the only one who tries to help Ike; the others only watch him, "five or six people in the hall, looking up at where he clung to the rail at the top step, his eyes

shut, bellowing” (187). Even in his distress, Ike does not garner sympathy from the larger community.

The second moment Ike serves as a source of entertainment to the community is when they discover his sexual relationship with the cow and, once again, gather to watch. This arrangement is hinted at at the end of the first section of “The Long Summer: Chapter One,” but the reader, like Ratliff, does not know what the “it” is that the men are rushing off to see and Bookwright is so disgusted by (180-181). Ratliff walks off to find out, telling a bawdy story out loud as he goes though no one is around to hear him, and the narrative immediately switches to Ike’s story. It is only after Ike’s journey is over that the narrative returns to the peep show. The language leading up to this moment is heavy with suspense. Ratliff walks along a path “which he had not seen before, which had not been there in May” (216) to a secluded spot that cannot be seen from the main road. Ratliff comes upon a “motionless row of backs” looking into a hole in Mrs. Littlejohn’s barn, and Ratliff “knew not only what he was going to see but that, like Bookwright, he did not want to see it, yet, unlike Bookwright, he was going to look” (217). The suspense is relieved when Ratliff looks into the barn, and “it was as though it were himself inside the stall with the cow, himself looking out of the blasted tongueless face at the row of faces watching him who had been given the wordless passions but not the specious words” (217). Finally, Ike and his “wordless passions” are revealed to Ratliff, and to the reader.

Ratliff’s plan to kill Ike’s passions along with the cow is set into motion once he discovers the romance; he defends himself to Mrs. Littlejohn, saying “You dont need to

tell me he aint got nothing else. I know that. Or that I can sholy leave him have at least this much. I know that too.... I aint going to leave him have what he does have simply because I am strong enough to keep him from it. I am stronger than him. Not righter. Not any better, maybe. But just stronger” (219). Ratliff knows he can force his will on Ike but also admits that this does not make him any better than Ike, which in turn implies that Ike is as much a person of worth as he is. While Ratliff’s decision leaves Ike bereft and alone, it comes from a complicated place of sympathy. Vickery sees Ratliff’s involvement in the decision to separate Ike from the cow as the “finest expression” of “a sane and balanced vision which can only be called human” (174). However, the narrative in the second section of “The Long Summer: Chapter One” humanizes Ike in a way the people do not care to see, and their decision to slaughter Ike’s cow becomes barbaric. Ratliff’s conversation with the Snopes men about the cost of killing Ike’s cow becomes a gross intrusion in Ike’s life, rather than the moral injunction it may have seemed otherwise. The men contort the relationship into a sexual perversion and concoct a solution where Ike eats the cow so that “not only the boy’s mind but his insides too, the seat of passion and sin, can have the proof that the partner of his sin is dead” (224). What sounded like a cure now seems a cruel punishment that is ultimately ineffective as Ike is left alone with a wooden trinket.

After the cow has been slaughtered and fed to Ike, the narrative abandons him in a reflection of his abandonment by the hamlet, revisiting him but once to find him a lesser man, presumably no longer doing work for Mrs. Littlejohn but spending his days in the barn with a wooden remembrance of his beloved. Ratliff looks in on Ike, on “the blasted

face turning and looking up at him, and for a fading instant there was something almost like recognition even if there could have been no remembering, in the devastated eyes, and the drooling mouth slaking and emitting a sound, hoarse, abject, not loud. Upon the overalled knees Ratliff saw the battered wooden effigy of a cow” (295). Dunn interprets Ike’s presence in the barn incorrectly when she claims that “unlike Houston, [Ike] is able to forget ... Ike can enjoy love’s bonds while escaping the shackles of despair at its loss” (422). Ike can do nothing but remember his lost love, ruined in his socially-inflicted loneliness. It is significant that the narrative does not record a scene where Ike is forced to eat his butchered cow for two reasons. First, the narrative silence is in itself a commentary on how unfathomable Ike’s loss is. The narrative cannot follow Ike in his grief because it is so profound and consuming, so much deeper than anything the rest of the community can conceive of, that it must be left in silence. The narrative cannot follow Ike because he is made to be truly and finally alone.

The second reason the narrative must abandon Ike before he is separated from the cow is to emphasize that Ike’s family and community fail to understand him. There is a disconnection between Ike’s mind and the minds of those around him, and it is this failure of the mind that pushes the people of Frenchman’s Bend to revert to communicate through the body. Ike’s mental disability prevents him from verbally communicating his needs, desires and motivations, and so the community around him does not understand how deep his emotional attachment to the cow really is. Since Ike’s community cannot comprehend his relationship with the cow, they retreat from the cognitive world of rationalizing and understanding Ike’s behavior – his isolation, his loneliness, his

compassion, his resourcefulness – and enter the physical world of food and sex because that is the only way they can make sense of his actions; they must bridge the cognitive and emotional gap between themselves and Ike by creating a connection based on physical needs they can relate to. It is not until the community makes a peep show out of Ike and his cow that the reader is confronted with the sexual nature of their bond. That is not to say that the sexual context of the relationship did not exist before the men began their voyeurism, but rather it was not the crux of Ike's relationship with the cow. It was only made the focal point once the community ceased to view Ike as cognitive, and thus ceased trying to understand him on a cognitive level.

Thus Ike is left behind, like Lucynell and Bishop, while the narrative moves on without him and without considering him. Even the limited sympathy he receives from those involved in the slaughter of his cow is obviously insufficient when compared to the magnitude of his loss: Ratliff thinks enough of Ike to check in on him once and Eck Snopes gives Ike the wooden cow, explaining that he “felt sorry for him. I thought maybe anytime he would happen to start thinking, that ere toy one would give him something to think about” (296). Clearly, Ike *is* thinking of the cow and his desolation shows this. Eck's compassionate gift and Ratliff's empathy, even Mrs. Littlejohn's patience and humanity, are not enough to balance Ike's loss. Ike is left there, by both the town and the narrative, alone in the barn with his wooden toy cow, a “shapeless figure quiet in the gloom” (294).

Conclusion

The narratives of Lucynell, Bishop, Benjy and Ike place these characters in unsupportive and often unloving environments. Each character is dealt hardship and abuse, either in the form of neglect or outright violence. Families do not fully come to their rescue, society does not step in to enact change on their behalf, and at the end of each narrative, there is a deep and disturbing sense that these characters will indeed not live happily ever after (Bishop's fate is confirmed as such even before his narrative's end). This trend is unsettling and raises the question of why there is so much neglect, so little love, given to characters whose actual personalities entreat those around them to show them more patience and dignity if not outright affection. When the other characters in each narrative view, speak of, or treat the mentally disabled character negatively, it reveals how the world is capable of doing the same to those with mental disabilities. When the narratives give an alternate, positive view of that same mentally disabled character, it reveals how such negativity is unjust.

For that is the power of these narratives – they contain characters whose personalities are contrasted with their personal tragedies to elicit sympathy from the *reader*. Neither Faulkner nor O'Connor was ever known to be a disability activist but their work begins to accomplish this task, whether intentional or not. Faulkner and O'Connor develop each of these characters to be more than rhetorical or narrative devices. Critical discussions of these characters, even discussions that take their mental disability into account, sometimes fail to recognize how each character's personality is presented in their stories. Lucynell is energetic and curious; Bishop is affectionate and

playful; Benjy is loving and desires comfort; and Ike is adventurous and independent. Their cognitive abilities and limitations do not lessen their unique individualities and the narratives go to great lengths to establish each personality as distinct and memorable. To view these characters as symbolic or rhetorical diminishes their worth within their stories and in the larger arena of human experience.

Olga Vickery observes that Benjy's humanity is forgotten when he attends Easter services with Dilsey, but it is not just his community that is guilty of this – critical treatment of Benjy, as well as Lucynell, Bishop, and Ike, overlooks their essential humanity. This dismisses carefully constructed narratives where each character is fleshed out with at least some measure of compassion and consideration, and it is perhaps most assuredly through each character's mistreatment (both within their narratives and without) that the reader comes to feel for them in a way they might not otherwise. Perhaps the feeling is indignation, perhaps love, but either way it is the seed of change.

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